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HODDER & STOUGHTON

Father's Day June 20th 1936.

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NOVELS BY

GERARD FAIRLIE

Birds of Prey
Shot in the Dark
Unfair Lady
Scissors Cut Paper
Stone Blunts Scissors
The Man Who Laughed
The Exquisite Lady
The Muster of the Vultures
Suspect
The Man With Talent

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GERARD FAIRLIE

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The characters in this book are entirely imaginary, and have no relation to any living person.

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THE ROPE WHICH HANGS

NUMBER Thirteen Laurel Avenue, on that dreary storm-racked January night, presented a spectacle calculated to cause the stoutest-hearted pedestrian to shudder involuntarily as he passed, hastening his steps towards some more inviting scene.

Set in a forlorn, neglected garden, the house, with its bare windows and bedraggled Venetian blinds, seemed the embodiment of decay; the "TO LET" boards creaking dismally in the wind—doleful vouchers to its lack of human occupants. There was about the whole place a curiously sinister atmosphere, a sense of ominous expectancy, as though it was only awaiting some evil happening to crumble into a thousand unwholesome fragments. Driving rain, startling flashes of lightning followed by awe-inspiring claps of thunder served to intensify the grim loneliness and utter desolation of this empty house, which even the brightest sunshine could not have made attractive. Untidy, straggling, yew bushes separated it from its neighbours on either side. A narrow path, thickly covered with weeds, led to the broken mossy stone steps facing the front door, on which the paint had long since pealed away. The

gate, its ill-omened number painted in startling red, swung listlessly on broken hinges; clanking a melancholy accompaniment to the noises of the storm.

Suddenly, from one of the ground floor rooms, there came that sound for which the house seemed to be waiting. A shriek of hopeless terror; a cry for succour full of such bitter despair and anguish that any hearer would have been appalled—but there was none to hear. The moaning wind rattling the windows, the gate ceaselessly clanking on its hinges and the intermittent peals of thunder were the only answer; whoever had called for help had called in vain.

Again there came a shriek, frantic, despairing; faint sounds of a frenzied struggle . . . then silence.

Had anyone possessed the temerity to approach the house that evening he would have seen a sight which might have disturbed his rest for many nights; a sight which explained only too clearly the meaning of those anguished screams. In the dimness of the room two figures were visible. One, limp and helpless, dangled from a hook upon the door; the other crouched beneath it, gazing in fiendish glee at the motionless form. A sudden dazzling flash of lightning lit up the darkness, revealing in intimate detail the features of the stooping man. Wild, glaring eyes, haggard cheeks and slack mouth; a face made bestial and inhuman

by its expression of savage cruelty. For a few seconds he remained staring at the hanging figure as though transfixed; then, rising to his feet, he wrote hurriedly on a sheet of paper clenched in one hand, crumpled it up into a ball and threw it on the floor. With a low mirthless laugh he darted to the door, flung it open and banging it to behind him, so that its ghastly burden jerked up and down violently, he dashed from the room . . . leaving it alone to its grim occupant.

The wind howled drearily round the house, drawing weird echoes from the decayed rafters; moaning dismally in the disused chimneys; while over all the storm continued to rage with unabated fury.

A figure suddenly emerged to the right of the building, running rapidly towards the gate; vaulted the low stone wall and stood for a moment staring back at the house as though waiting for someone to follow. Again there came that dreadful laugh, wild and merciless; then without another glance behind him the man fled down the road and was soon lost to sight in the shadows.

With rattling windows, creaking gate and forbidding aspect that disused house in Laurel Avenue held guard over its tragic secret; with intangible menace driving away any benighted wayfarer who thought to seek shelter within its walls.

" SOME marmalade, dear ? "

Pamela Tenant leant over the breakfast table and pushed the dish within reach of her father.

" Thanks."

Raising his head for a moment from the newspaper in which he had been deeply absorbed, Guy Tenant helped himself liberally ; then he smiled at his daughter.

" Seen Hugh lately, Pam ? "

With slightly heightened colour Pamela glanced at him in surprise.

" Well . . . er, no. Not really lately . . . not for a week or so. Why ? "

" Because if you don't want to miss him I think you'd better stay in this morning, my dear. I rather think we're going to be honoured by a visit."

" But why ? You don't mean . . . there hasn't been another ? "

The girl had paled visibly ; she looked worried and anxious.

" I'm afraid there has, my dear," Guy Tenant spoke very seriously now. " They've discovered another body—a girl this time. Same sort of thing. Found hung in an empty house down at Worthing—and our friend's been called in again."

" Read it. What does it say ? "

"ANOTHER GHASTLY OUTRAGE

A NINTH VICTIM OF THE ROPE WHICH HANGS

"Yesterday afternoon the terribly mutilated body of a young woman—whose identity has not, as yet, been established—was discovered hanging from a rope in the front room of '13' Laurel Avenue, Worthing, which has been empty for over three years. Obviously, this unfortunate girl has fallen a victim to the inhuman monster to whose account already lie eight similar murders. All the circumstances are identical. As in every other instance the body was discovered hanging from a curiously meshed rope in an empty house. As in every other instance a piece of paper, with figures scrawled on it in pencil, was found on the floor of the tragic room. This time the figures represent 23. *It is interesting to recall that in the previous eight cases the number has been* 16, 13, 32, 17, 15, 16, 31, 21. *The other victims have included a banker, tramp, schoolboy, tobacconist, barrister, sailor, actor and shop assistant. The extraordinary mystery surrounding these crimes is further intensified by the fact that they have been actuated by no apparent motive. They appear to have been committed quite wantonly, without the slightest provocation. In no case has robbery supplied a reason. The victims' pockets do not appear to have been tampered with in any way, and in*

some instances large sums of money have been left untouched. Much resentment is felt in the South of England on account of the extraordinary inability of the police to bring the criminal to justice. Eight months have now elapsed since the first body was discovered in an empty house in Eastbourne. Since then, Hastings, Brighton, Bognor, Littlehampton, Portsmouth, Selsey and Newhaven have all been the scene of these abominable outrages. It has been established beyond doubt that each crime was committed at the time of the full moon; a fact which has induced a belief that they are the work of a dangerous maniac. The police are completely at a loss, owing to an utter lack of incriminating clues. Each crime has been carried out with consummate skill. In no case have footprints or finger-marks been left which might lead to the eventual detection of this inhuman murderer. The gravity with which the authorities at Scotland Yard view these outrages is evidenced by the fact that they have allotted the case to Detective Inspector Hugh Chambers, whose brilliant exploits in the past have caused him to be regarded as their 'star' detective. So far, however, the criminal has continued to outwit even his noted powers; but it is sincerely to be hoped that it will not be long before any repetition of these ghastly crimes is put to an end. While admitting the difficulties of the case, one cannot help wondering whether the police are doing all that they should to bring this murderer to justice."

Tenant put down the paper and continued his interrupted breakfast.

"Well" he added, as he slowly munched a piece of thickly buttered toast, "I'm afraid old Hugh's going to catch it in the neck soon, if he doesn't get a line on this talented fellow."

Pamela, in whose cheeks two brilliant red spots were shining, made no reply for a moment; then glancing up she spoke passionately, as though unable entirely to subdue her rising anger.

"I think it's simply despicable the way people criticise the police," she burst out. "Do they think they're superhuman, possessed of some extraordinary sense by which they can get a line—as you call it—on anybody they're after? As though Hugh hasn't done everything, and more, a mortal man *can* do to stop these crimes. It's . . ."

"But, my dear," Tenant raised his hand appealingly, "you can't blame people for getting uneasy about things. After all, the police *are* our natural protectors and if they fail us—well, the insurance companies will raise their premiums."

The remark was greeted by a stormy look from Pamela, who cried indignantly:

"But, good heavens, must they be infallible then? Aren't they allowed *any* failures? I'm sure Hugh's done more than his fair share of 'protecting' in the past, and . . . ."

Suddenly the telephone bell rang imperiously. It was placed in the hall and both Pamela and her father remained silent as they waited for the maid to answer it. In a second there was a knock at the door and the little parlourmaid entered.

"Detective Inspector Hugh Chambers wants to speak to you, sir."

Tenant darted a triumphant glance at his daughter as he rose and walked to the door.

"Am I a prophet or am I not, my dear? What time would you like him to call?"

Without waiting for an answer he darted into the hall and lifted the receiver.

"Hallo!"

"That you, Guy?"

"Yes. I thought I'd get a tootle from you this morning."

"Seen the papers, I suppose? Well, it's true enough, I'm afraid. Tell me—are you free this morning? Can you come along?"

"Wouldn't miss a chance of 'copy' for worlds, my boy. Where shall I meet you?"

"I'll collect you in my car. There's a fast train to Worthing from Victoria, 9.5. That O.K.?"

"Quite."

"Righto! Better bring a toothbrush along. Might have to stay the night. Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

Tenant replaced the receiver and hastened back to the dining-room.

"Well," cried Pamela excitedly. "Is he taking you along?"

Tenant smiled cheerfully.

"He is," he answered. "Coming along immediately to pick me up. We might have to stay the night, my dear, so have my case ready, will you?"

"All right. What train are you catching?"

"Nine-five Victoria, so there's not a great deal of time. Lord! It's just what I need —a bit of fresh copy. That last chapter of 'The Marlow Murders' was getting me stuck."

"You're becoming positively morbid, Dad," cried the girl indignantly.

"Oh, Pam, I'm not," Tenant hastened to vindicate himself. "It's only . . . well, after all, it's our bread and butter, isn't it? . . . not to mention marmalade."

He had reseated himself at the table and now commenced to place a goodly portion of this delicacy on his half-eaten piece of toast.

"I suppose so. But it's terrible, anyway," sighed Pamela, then rising to her feet she walked to the door, opened it and paused. "Shall you take your gun?"

"Rather. Gives that indefinable touch of adventure, my dear. Brings thrills to the thrill-monger, and . . ."

But the girl had vanished, and with a humorous twinkle in his eyes Guy Tenant pushed back the breakfast things, filled his pipe and was soon deep in the paper again.

The early morning sunshine played lightly about the room, drawing brilliant reflections from the cups and saucers, imparting an added radiance to the bowl of daffodils which adorned the table, and coming to rest finally on the wavy, grey-flecked hair of the seated man. It outlined the rugged features, firm mouth and deep-set, blue eyes in whose depths a humorous twinkle for ever lurked; a kindly face, warranted to prove an unfailing passport to the friendship of men and women alike.

For many years now Guy Tenant had been renowned throughout England for his excellent detective stories, in which a happy combination of clever plots and distinguished writing had endeared him to an ever-increasing public. No bookstall dared be without his latest novel; no library neglect to stock his books. He had become a fixed institution; a household word. Yet this amazing popularity in no way affected the author's character. Tenant had remained genial and unassuming; had seemed indeed to regard his success as a rather astonishing, but exceedingly pleasant, whim of Providence. He was that rather unusual type of individual whom men unanimously account a good fellow, and women invariably trust. A widower for many years, all his hopes and ambitions were bound up in Pamela, who ruled his heart and household with a careless ease which belied her twenty-three years.

And it was of Pamela he was now thinking as his eyes mechanically scanned the lines of print ; of Pamela and her heightened colour when he had spoken of Hugh Chambers.

"I wonder," murmured Tenant softly, beneath his breath. "Pam and Hugh ? I wonder. Nothing I should like better myself. Mustn't butt in though. It's their concern—not mine."

His thoughts were interrupted by a ring on the front door bell. Tenant jumped to his feet and without waiting for the little maid to answer it, rushed to the door, flung it open and with welcoming greetings ushered in his friend—Detective Inspector Hugh Chambers of Scotland Yard.

"Good gracious, Hugh, how quick you've been ! I wasn't expecting you for another ten minutes at the least."

The other laughed.

"The new bus, Guy. I'm afraid I exceeded the speed limit a bit, but after all what's the good of being a policeman if you can't snatch occasional privileges ? It's all in the day's work, too, really."

Tenant laughed and looked approvingly at the young man, noting the clean-cut features, thoughtful brow and determined chin. If Pamela had chosen, well . . . no one could dispute her good taste. Yet he could see that all was not well with his friend. An anxious look in the steady grey eyes, a restless movement of the hands showed that his

nerves were feeling the strain of the last eight months; eight months during which an entire lack of any clue had resulted in completely fruitless investigations.

"Well, old man," said Tenant briskly, after conducting him into the study which opened out of the dining-room. "What will you drink—while I get my things together?"

"Oh, nothing, thanks. Too early yet, I'm afraid. You run along. I'll . . . Why, hallo, Pamela. You're looking as fresh as the morning dew. How's the world?"

Tenant hastened out of the room while Hugh shook hands with the young girl. His eyes dwelt with pleasure on her delicate features. Pamela Tenant's good looks had been proverbial throughout the convent school where she was educated—as had also her entire lack of conceit. Golden hair, blue eyes heavily fringed with long black lashes; a peach-like complexion; straight, aquiline nose and rosy mouth; a face in which great strength of character and that elusive quality called charm were indelibly imprinted—to Hugh Chambers the most bewitching face in the world. At this moment, however, an anxious frown drove away the smile with which she had greeted him, and she cried:

"Oh, Hugh. How terrible about this other murder. What a fiend! Who *can* it be?"

"That's what I'd like to know, my dear, and that's what I'm going—*to*—*find*—*out.*"

As he spoke a look of inflexible determination hardened his face, making it grim, implacable. This was the first time the young man had tasted the bitterness of failure—and he was finding it distinctly unpalatable.

"But how did the police find out about it, Hugh?" asked Pamela quickly.

"I've just been phoning to Inspector Hodges, the officer at Worthing, and he says a little boy informed them. Discovered it when he was searching for a ball he'd dropped in the garden."

"And have they found any clues? The papers say they haven't, but . . ."

"I'm afraid that for once the papers are right, Pam. Hodges says there isn't a smell of one. Nine murders and we're miles from any scent; not the slightest grounds on which to work. Whoever this devil is . . . he's mighty clever. I'm not at all sure that he won't break me, too, before he's done."

"Oh, but how unfair," broke in Pamela, her eyes flashing with indignation, "how unfair! As though you haven't done everything possible. It's abominable."

"Yes, yes, my dear, I know, but it's my job and if you fail in a job, well . . . you get turned down. That's only common sense—survival of the fittest, you know.

Anyway, I've not come here to worry you with my troubles. It's bad enough to be purloining your father for a while."

For a moment the young girl hesitated, then she said slowly :

" Tell me, Hugh, are you sure he doesn't, well . . . hinder you a bit ? I know it's an immense help to him in his work, being able to see the real thing and all that . . . but it's been worrying me rather—whether perhaps he's . . . well, whether you mightn't get on better without him."

Hugh Chambers laughed and shook his head emphatically.

" No, no, no, my dear. Quite the contrary, in fact. Guy's been my right hand in every way. He acts the Doctor Watson part to perfection. You see, he looks at things from quite a different standpoint—that of the writer—and one can't look at these things from too many angles, my dear. Ah ! " he smiled at Tenant, who had entered the room, warmly clad in greatcoat and muffler. " Here you are, Guy. I was just telling Pam what a good partnership we make—the author and the sleuth ! "

" H'm ! " said Tenant thoughtfully. " Don't know about that. Can't see I'm of much use to you, old man, but since you've let me follow you behind the scenes my sales have literally leapt ! "

Hugh Chambers laughed, then glanced at his watch.

"Well, if you'll excuse us, Pamela, I think we'd better be moving along. We've only twenty minutes left. Wish us luck."

"Oh, I do—the very best," cried the girl earnestly, leading the way to the front door which she quickly opened. "You'll come back with Daddy, won't you, and let me know how you've got on?"

"Yes, if I possibly can—anyway I'll be along before the week's out."

"Right. Good-bye, Daddy. Look after him, won't you, Hugh? Good-bye."

The two men quickly walked down the paved path towards the waiting car, entered it and in a few moments were on their way to Victoria. Pamela watched their departure from the sitting-room window, a rather wistful expression on her pretty face.

THE ROPE WHICH HANGS CHAPTER III

HUGH CHAMBERS was ordinarily a somewhat erratic driver, cutting in and speeding whenever chance offered, but to-day his handling of the car was monotonously steady. He kept to the same even pace throughout the twenty minutes' run to the station, ignoring many tempting occasions for cutting in, seemingly oblivious of the slowing up of other cars. It was obvious his thoughts

were far away and, from his expression, that they were none too pleasing.

The young detective was beginning to think that luck had deserted him entirely, just when his feet were reaching up to the topmost rung of the ladder. Although only a little over thirty he had soared far above the heads of older—but less talented—colleagues in the force ; he had won approval from one and all for his brilliant " flares " which so often resulted in many dangerous criminals receiving free board and lodging at His Majesty's expense. However mysterious and difficult a crime appeared, Hugh Chambers had always managed to extract clues from the most obdurate material ; deducing fire where others had not even yet suspected smoke.

That was up to eight months ago. Since then . . . well, there was more than a grain of truth in his assertion to Pamela Tenant that the criminal, to whose account lay those nine unsolved murders, was likely to break him as well. For some time there had come a change, subtle, indefinable, but yet very vital, in the atmosphere of almost worshipping admiration with which he had been surrounded. People—even his inferiors —had begun to criticise his methods ; to criticise them disparagingly. He had been offered suggestions and advice from men who, a few months earlier, would have laughed to scorn the idea of such presumption. And

yet . . . what could he do? No bucket ever drew water from an empty well, and of all the crimes he had investigated none were so entirely devoid of clues as these eight murders. Should this last one prove equally barren, Hugh Chambers might find himself assuming a considerably lower position than that which he had regarded formerly as merely a stepping stone to still higher honours. And this . . . when life had seemed so smiling, when an added interest—that of Pamela Tenant—had awakened him to the possibility of conquest in a far different field. But he must not think of her now, except as a further inducement towards recovering his prestige.

It had all started on the 25th of July of the previous year. Hugh Chambers needed no calendar to remind him of that grim date. Up to then life had handed him only the roses; from the 25th of July onwards he had discovered thorns, thorns which continued to multiply and choke his every effort.

For some days a wealthy banker, Frederick Childs, had caused consternation to his colleagues and clients by failing to appear at the bank; this consternation being somewhat tempered, however, when it was found that his affairs were in impeccable order and that his departure was accompanied by no simultaneous discrepancy in the funds. It was, therefore, a matter of widespread horror

when his body, dreadfully mutilated and disfigured, was found hanging from a beam in the sitting-room of Holly Lodge, a rambling old house in Eastbourne, which had been empty for several months. The house agents, Messrs. Brook & Welch, were showing a prospective client over the building when they had discovered the corpse. They immediately informed the local police, whose inability to detect any incriminating clues had resulted in Scotland Yard being called in to deal with the crime.

It was thus that Hugh Chambers had first started on the trail of a criminal whose skill and cunning, brutality and ruthlessness had inspired in him feelings of unwilling admiration and bitter loathing. For there had been apparently no motive for the murder ; it was just a piece of inhuman wantonness ; killing for the love of killing—a type of villainy which demands immediate extermination.

Hugh had wasted no time. He examined the body, the house, questioned the banker's wife and friends—but discovered no finger-marks, footprints or reasons why anyone should murder this highly respected man. Mr. Childs' pocket-book, containing a large sum of money and several important letters, was quite intact ; obviously the motive was not robbery. A piece of paper lay beside the corpse, on which, scrawled in pencil in an educated hand, was the figure sixteen. This, however, provided only another baffling

problem, for the sheet was one torn from a notebook, many thousands of similar copies being sold throughout the year. It supplied no fingermarks and only increased the extraordinary mystery which every aspect of the crime served to accentuate. That it was suicide—a theory which Hugh had favoured for a while—was at once rejected by the doctor, who declared that only a second party could have knotted the rope so intricately. Also . . . there was no apparent reason why Frederick Childs should commit suicide; which, of course, is no conclusive arugment against his having done so. However, the doctor's report was definite, and Hugh had no doubt in his own mind but that the banker had been foully murdered. The affair was a nine days' wonder, then a scandal in high circles filled the papers to the exclusion of all else—a fact for which Hugh was deeply thankful. It was not pleasant to read, day by day, disparaging articles as to the inefficiency of the police force and his own utter lack of intelligence. By the end of a fortnight Frederick Childs' tragic death had become a memory in the minds of the British public; by the end of three weeks it was forgotten altogether.

A month passed; a month during which Hugh, working late and early, had left no stone unturned, no theory unexamined; a month of anxious thought and completely fruitless effort.

Then had come the second blow.

On the 30th of August another body was discovered, hanging in similar circumstances in an empty house in Hastings. This time the victim was obviously one of those care-free, work-shy individuals generally termed tramps. His clothes bore the unmistakable stamp of vagrancy; his boots boasted no soles; his pockets were empty. And . . . *he had been brutally murdered.* The affair shocked the South of England out of its summer holiday calm. It renewed, with increased intensity, the sensation caused by the banker's death. There was something devilish; something sinister in these crimes. Who could this monster be who killed indiscriminately banker and tramp, Dives and Lazarus? A wave of hot anger and bitter demand for justice swept through the land. Pictures of bathing belles were ousted from the news sheets to be replaced by those of the two tragic houses; the victims; their relations; funerals, and anything else having any connection. And Hugh Chambers, still deep in the mystery of the first crime, was called upon to deal with this second tragedy.

That they were both the work of one man was obvious from the start. The rope—one of a curious mesh—was knotted in precisely the same manner; knotted in a way which suggested that the criminal had been taught the art on board ship. Only a sailor

could have tied them so skilfully. To this clue—if it could be called one—Hugh had already given much thought ; but sailors are numerous. It was a blind alley clue, leading nowhere.

Again, a similar piece of paper with figures scrawled on it—this time thirteen—had definitely established the connection. It also added to Hugh's continuous perplexity. In this case, after much inquiry and broadcasting of the victim's photograph in the press, his sister, a respectable working woman from the East End of London, had come forward and given particulars as to her brother. The black sheep of the family, he had been a wanderer all his life ; his terrible death being the first news she had received of him for several years. Again the suicide theory was discussed and rejected. Of motives there were apparently none ; of fingermarks, footprints or any other clue, definitely none. Bill Rogers, tramp and beggar, by his tragic death rose from life-long obscurity to a fame equalled only by that of Frederick Childs, wealthy banker and highly respected citizen.

This second tragedy took rather longer to fade from prominence in the newspapers—and the public mind. It was, however, just making way for news of the approaching football season when another ghastly discovery in an empty house in Brighton, startled the South out of all thought of

sport ; revived the details of both preceding crimes and raised public feeling against this atrocious murderer to a pitch which could only be likened to that of the Paris mob during the Revolution ; a pitch which had never been attained in this country before.

In due course Bognor, Littlehampton, Portsmouth, Selsey and Newhaven became scenes of these frightful atrocities, and terror —acute, unnerving terror—gripped the South of England like a deadly plague. People became wary of each other ; suspicious of friendly invitations from any with whom they had no long-standing acquaintance. Talk of satanic doings, unhealthy, morbid talk, became the gossip of country firesides. Old and young feared to walk abroad at night ; a terrible oppression cast a gloom on everyone's spirits . . . the nation's *moral* was becoming unwholesomely affected. Yet still the police did nothing—or appeared to do nothing. And Hugh Chambers grew daily more hopeless and careworn.

As he drove the car rapidly towards Victoria his thoughts were very bitter. Suddenly, however, he was jolted out of this unhappy reverie by Guy Tenant, who asked what he intended doing with the car once they had arrived at the station.

"Oh, I told Jenkins to be there to meet us. That will be all right. He'll take it back to the garage for me."

They had now arrived in Wilton Road,

and in a few seconds Hugh brought the car to rest in the station courtyard close to the Tube entrance. A man immediately sprang to open the door for them.

"Thanks, Jenkins. Just take her back, will you? I shan't be wanting her again until to-morrow."

"Very good, sir."

The man touched his hat and climbed into the driver's seat, while Hugh hurried his friend towards the booking-office. There were only a few minutes before the train was due to depart, and it was with a sigh of relief that the detective jumped into a vacant first and bundled Tenant in after him.

"A near thing that! Didn't think we'd run it so close. My watch must be slow. What do you make it?"

"Can't see without my glasses. Have a look," answered Tenant, extending his left arm towards the door.

Hugh glanced at it quickly, was silent for a moment, then said:

"Thanks. Yes, I'm three minutes out. Phew! Wouldn't have done to miss this train."

The whistle suddenly blew and to an accompaniment of smoke and noise the express sailed majestically out of the station. After removing hats and overcoats, the two friends settled down with books and cigarettes to pass the journey as comfortably as possible. It was not long, however, before the

detective threw aside his book and gazed unseeingly out of the window. An idea had occurred to him, vague, nebulous, as yet not wholly defined ; but one which he felt, were he able to follow it to its natural conclusion, might place him on the track of the man he was after. Hugh pulled thoughtfully at his cigarette. A plan of action was beginning to take form in his brain ; a plan based on the flimsiest clue it is true, yet had not all his successes in the past been based on just such a triviality ? A deeper gleam shone in the young man's eyes ; his lips had tightened and determination seemed engraved on every feature. Here was no man with whom to trifle. Hugh Chambers on the scent was one to respect and fear ; a human bloodhound not to be drawn from his quarry.

After a few desultory remarks and occasional glances at his friend, Guy Tenant, not wishing to interrupt the other's absorption, had soon become engrossed in his book and did not look up again until they were entering Worthing station.

Here they were met by a sharp-featured, keen-eyed police officer, whom the detective introduced to Tenant as " Detective Inspector Hodges—and a very good friend of mine."

" Pleased to meet you, sir," said Tenant pleasantly. " Hope you don't mind me tagging on to the little party. Like all of us authors I can't resist the opportunity of getting fresh ' copy '."

"By no means, Mr. Tenant," Hodges hastened to reassure him. "It's a pleasure to meet such a distinguished writer—and I've been told you frequently give our friend useful hints."

"He does," agreed Hugh, as they made their way through an excited crowd of arriving passengers, out of the station and into a car which was waiting for them by the kerb.

"I'll drive you straight to number thirteen," went on Hodges, as Hugh climbed in beside him. "It's not far from here and then we can go on to the police station afterwards."

"Right," agreed Hugh, "but tell me—nothing's been touched, has it? You haven't had the body cut down or disturbed in any way?"

"Nothing," answered the other quickly. "We sent a doctor along yesterday, as soon as the crime was discovered, just to make certain the girl *was* dead, but it only needed a glance to make sure of that. Been dead for some time, the doctor said. I've asked him to come up to thirteen in half an hour so that he can give the body a thorough examination. I've had two constables there all night keeping guard with orders to seize anyone who enters the house."

"Good," said Hugh curtly, "And about that slip of paper? Who's got that?"

"It's down at the police station now.

Just an ordinary slip of paper like all the others—torn from a notebook I should think —with twenty-three written in pencil."

"And the figures? Written by the same hand as the rest? There's not much individuality about figures, but still . . ."

"Yes," broke in Hodges quickly, "I'm certain they're by the same hand. The three is identical with two of the other three's—those in thirteen and thirty-two. The two is a bit different though, bigger and with a longer tail, but I'm pretty sure it's by the same hand. And it's bound to be. Why, all the circumstances are similar. Empty house—body found hanging—curiously twisted rope. Yes, it's the same man all right. I wouldn't like to be in *his* shoes when he's caught."

"*When* he's caught," echoed Hugh, somewhat bitterly.

"Well, his luck can't hold out much longer," went on Hodges confidently, "he's bound to make a mistake some time, and then . . ."

"Only hope to God he's made one now," murmured Hugh earnestly, then seeing that they were drawing up at the gate to a large empty house, he added quickly, "Is this it?"

"Yes," answered Hodges as he brought the car to a standstill by the kerb. "I went down to the house agents this morning and got the key—here it is. I'm afraid we

didn't bother about it last night; just broke a window and climbed in."

He handed Hugh a small Yale key and when they had all alighted, led the way up the grass-grown path towards the tragic house, which even in the early morning sunshine seemed dark and gloomy.

"You asked them whether they'd let any likely tenants view it recently?" asked Hugh.

"Yes—but no one's inquired about it since it's been vacant—which is nearly three years. And I don't wonder," added Hodges. "Dismal place. You don't need to be superstitious to hesitate about buying *this* number thirteen."

Hugh fitted the key in the rusty lock and after some slight difficulty the door swung open. A musty, airless smell greeted them as they stood in the doorway; a damp, oppressive atmosphere seemed to hang about the place. Involuntarily the three men recoiled, then as though to hide their momentary aversion, hastened to enter the sombre-looking hall; the great door shutting to behind them with a reverberating, almost menacing clang. On the instant the door of a room to their left was opened hurriedly and two policemen emerged, touching their hats to the officers.

"Well?" asked Hodges quickly. "Anyone been here?"

"No, sir. Not a soul."

"Right. Go back and report at the station. Tell Burns and Parker to relieve you here in half an hour."

"Very good, sir."

They wasted no time. A second later they were hastening to the gate.

"This way," said Hodges.

Hugh, with Tenant close on his heels, followed the inspector into the room, and in an awed silence they gazed at the grim form which jerked spasmodically up and down through the sudden opening of the door on which it hung.

In an instant a mask seemed to transform the features of the man known as Scotland Yard's most brilliant detective. This was his sphere; with gleaming eyes, stiff lips and stony face Hugh carefully examined the corpse and saw that what Hodges had said was only too obvious—the girl had been dead for some time. Taking a sharp knife from his pocket, he cut down the body and with the help of the others, laid it gently on the floor, then kneeling down beside it he commenced a long, minute scrutiny; never hesitating for one moment; never pausing an instant; completely oblivious to all else—a bloodhound on the trail.

After a careful examination of the knots he slit the loop across and removed it from the girl's throat, exposing to view a terrible wound in the flesh, black and hideous, where the rope had tortured it. With deft fingers

he searched every particle of clothing, seeking patiently that one clue upon which to build up a mass of deductions. For long moments he knelt, gazing through a magnifying glass at the soles of her shoes, then he sat back suddenly, with eyes staring into space, deep in thought.

Hodges, meanwhile, crouched on hands and knees, was carefully inspecting the floor for footprints. A hopeless task! The bare boards were so thickly encrusted with mud and dirt as to make such a proceeding a mere formality. After a while he gave it up in despair and approached the other detective; a gleam of interest brightening his eyes as he saw Hugh's look of deep concentration.

"Any luck, old man?" he whispered eagerly.

It appeared natural to speak softly in this house where the walls themselves seemed to be straining to catch their every utterance. As though awakening from a trance Hugh looked up, apparently realising, with surprise, that he was not alone.

"Luck?" he answered slowly, "no, not much, but I should say that this girl was nearly dead before the rope finished her off. Look at these marks, here . . . and here."

With gentle fingers he bared the girl's neck and pointed to several deep bruises underneath the unsightly wound where the rope had encircled it. Then, lifting the

emaciated wrist, he showed similar scars where cruel fingers had gripped them.

"You see? She's been badly injured. Put up a fight, I should say. Certainly didn't enter the house willingly. The question is—how *did* she get in? I suppose you've examined all the other rooms? No broken windows or open doors or anything?"

"Nothing," answered Hodges quickly, "but we went over it last night and had only our torches. I waited this morning until you came."

"Right—well, I think we'd better go over it now. Found any footprints?"

"None whatsoever," replied Hodges dejectedly.

"I can't understand it," broke in Hugh, "it's been the same every time. Just dirt and mud—but no footprints. Bare boards ought to give a perfect impression and that garden's muddy enough, goodness knows! Why, look at our footprints—nothing could be clearer. It seems as though the devil himself had something to do with these crimes. There's nothing to catch on to."

"What about a straw?" burst in Tenant eagerly.

While the two detectives were making their examinations, the author had watched them intently; refraining, as was his wont, from any interruption. It was this quality—a knack of effacing himself when necessary, of

remaining silent and unobtrusive while Hugh was absorbed—which had appealed to the latter and made it possible for Tenant's inclusion in his investigations. Now, however, the two detectives glanced up in surprise; a trace of irritation being apparent in Hugh's voice as he asked:

"Straw? What d'you mean?"

"Well, what you said just now made me think of catching on to straw—and I was wondering whether it mightn't *be* straw."

"What on earth are you talking about?" cried Hugh impatiently.

"I was wondering whether perhaps straw was used to prevent footprints," said Tenant somewhat diffidently. "In my last book—have you read it, 'The Secret of Wycherley Towers'?"

Both men shook their heads, but in Hugh's eyes a look of eagerness had replaced his momentary annoyance.

"Well, the villain—who is really the younger son living in the house, removes valuables by night—old china, paintings, all that sort of thing—and in order to avoid leaving footprints he covers his shoes with a sort of golosh made of straw—about twice the size of his shoes—with the wisps all sticking out higgledy-piggledy so that there isn't any clear impression, just a blurred outline of the straw. I was thinking that all this mud might easily have been left like that."

He pointed towards the masses of dirt which encrusted the ground, of which the greater part was deposited close to the door.

For a moment Hugh stared at his friend in amazement, then he started to laugh hysterically until, his mirth completely overpowering him, with a loud guffaw he rushed from the room and leant swaying helplessly against the lintel of the front door. Hodges and Tenant, the latter's face a mixture of resentment and hilarity—Hugh's laughter was dangerously infectious—had followed him out of the room and now stood motionless until he managed to regain control sufficiently to gasp :

" Don't mean any irreverence to the dead —that's why I came out here—but the thought of this devil, with nine murders to his credit . . . well, hardly credit . . . but anyway, the thought of him paddling about in straw goloshes, oh——"

He broke off to laugh once more, and this time the two others followed suit. When they were returned to gravity again, Hugh went on :

" Sorry, Guy, but I'm afraid that's only feasible in novels. You might let me have a copy of that one, by the way, I should enjoy reading it," he added, with an amused twinkle in his eyes. " But now let's proceed to investigate the other rooms of what the board outside describes as ' this elegant and commodious residence.' Upstairs first, I think."

So saying he moved to the staircase and started to climb the short flight leading to the first floor. Hodges and Tenant, the latter still somewhat chastened, followed close on his heels, and in this order they examined the four bedrooms on that floor and proceeded to the next. Here there were two small rooms and a large one; the last obviously intended for a nursery, as there were bars to the window. It needed only a cursory inspection to reveal the fact that there was nothing of interest there and that no one could have possibly entered the house that way.

At this moment there came a loud rat-tat at the front door; a sound which caused the three men to stop dead in their tracks and stare questioningly at each other.

"It's all right," cried Hodges quickly. "I expect that's Doctor Cooper. I told him to come along, you know."

"Oh, of course, I'd forgotten him," cried Hugh, leading the way down the staircase. "Anyhow, there's nothing to be gained by remaining up here. It's pretty obvious no one got in by these windows."

As they reached the bottom of the staircase there was another loud hammering on the door and Hodges hurried forward to open it. A tall, middle-aged man was standing on the step, the frown of impatience which had clouded his face giving way immediately to a cheerful smile as the door was opened.

"Thought you'd all got murdered," he announced, shaking Hodges by the hand.

The latter hastened to introduce him to the others and then led the way to the room where the corpse was lying. In dead silence the doctor examined the body while the others stood grouped about, waiting anxiously for any new light which he might shed on the murder. After five minutes of careful scrutiny he arose and reverently covered the discoloured face and neck with a large handkerchief. He then turned to Hugh and shook his head.

"No, I'm afraid I can't be of much help, Inspector," he said gravely. "The girl *was* murdered, and badly mauled about, too, before being actually hanged. There's not the slightest possibility of suicide and I should say she's been dead some time."

"Let's see," Hugh was searching eagerly in his pockets and in a moment had withdrawn a little diary, the leaves of which he started to turn over hurriedly. "About the time of the last full moon, d'you think, Doctor?"

He broke off and stared thoughtfully out of the window, a frown of perplexity shadowing his face. Suddenly, swinging round abruptly he turned to the doctor:

"Tell me, Doctor, is it fact or fiction that human beings *are* affected by the moon? Is it mere coincidence that every one of these crimes has taken place at the time of the

full moon, or does it point to the fact that there's a dangerous lunatic about and that on the next full moon we may expect another ghastly murder ? "

Doctor Cooper was silent for a moment. He stared before him in deep thought, then said slowly :

" It's a very difficult question. Personally I don't doubt it for a moment, but other doctors would laugh the idea to scorn. Only, if I were you, Inspector "—and his words were spoken with such earnestness that they struck a chill into the hearts of his listeners— " if I were you, I should try to place a guard round all the empty houses in the South of England next full moon—oh, of course I know it's not feasible, but still . . ."

Hugh's face was very white and set.

" You mean——? " he asked curtly.

" I mean that in my opinion these crimes are the work of a homicidal lunatic. I mean that unless a stop is soon put to them, other people whose minds are just on the borderland will start to do likewise. I mean, Inspector Chambers, that the power of auto-suggestion is so strong as to prove a very serious menace to weak-minded people, and although so far, I believe, these crimes have all been the work of one man—it won't be long, I'm certain of it, before his example is followed ; before every full moon brings its ghastly toll of similar outrages."

His intense earnestness impressed the three

listeners even more strongly than the actual words, filling them with an oppressive sense of foreboding, grim, intangible. Could this really be the answer to it all? thought Hugh. An unbalanced brain upon which in some mysterious fashion the moon exerted a terrible power? And if so, how could they ever hope to exterminate this fiend? Lunatics are proverbially clever. A sane man, however warped his idea of right may be, can be captured by sane means. How could one hope to trace a man whose mentality forbade one from using ordinary methods of detection? How . . . ? But this disheartening train of thought was not likely to be of much use, and briskly shaking away his momentary depression, Hugh said solemnly:

"Well, Doctor, I sincerely hope you're wrong in these gloomy prophecies, but anyway it's no good pondering over them now. What I want to find out at the moment is how this maniac—if he be one—was able to get into the house. There are still some rooms we haven't examined. I propose to continue. Coming with us, Doctor, or have you other calls?"

"No, not till this afternoon, Inspector," replied the doctor quickly, "and I should very much like to accompany you if I may."

"Right."

Hugh led the way down the passage to a door at the end. This he opened and entered

what apparently had been a drawing-room. Large french windows were set in the end wall, and with a quick movement the detective darted towards them and examined the bolts. All were begrimed with dust; obviously they had not been opened for years. With another careful look around Hugh joined the others who were grouped in the doorway, and said:

"Nothing doing there. Let's try the rest."

Two more rooms on the ground floor gave a like result, and in grim silence they descended to the basement. Great shutters prevented any daylight from entering the low narrow kitchen, and it was by the light of torches which the two detectives had produced from commodious pockets that all the bolts were carefully inspected and found to be intact; a thick layer of dust gave indisputable proof that no one had entered the house that way. An examination of the small back kitchen produced the same result; both window and door were heavily barred and bolted. In a mystified silence the four men stared at each other, a look of bewilderment on every face.

Suddenly Tenant darted a glance, half eager, half abashed, at his friend and cried:

"What about the cellar window? In my last book 'The Murder of Lucy Verrell' the——"

But Hugh interrupted him quickly.

"Good man," he cried, "I'd forgotten the cellar. Where on earth is it? There must be one, unless it's an outhouse in the garden."

With renewed hope they searched each room eagerly once more; kitchen, back kitchen and larder; opening every cupboard door, seeking in each nook and corner for the elusive cellar. But in vain.

Then suddenly Hugh crouched down on hands and knees and started to examine the floor, on which the dust lay thick in great unsightly masses. Putting his torch close to the boards he carefully ran his fingers over the ground until the light fell on a small iron chain, over which much dirt lay clustered. With a cry of triumph he stood up, holding the chain in one hand. He gave it a gentle pull and immediately a small trap door was revealed, leading down by means of narrow stone steps to a well of blackness. With torch raised high above his head Hugh tried to pierce the darkness, but with small success; then removing something bright and shining from his pocket he turned to Hodges and muttered curtly:

"Got a gun, Hodges?"

"Yes, here," said the other, quickly producing from an inner pocket a vicious-looking automatic.

"Good! Well get it ready and follow me down. You others had better stay here. Our friend may be hiding below. It's not likely, of course, but . . . if he is here and tries to escape this way, seize him. Drop the trap door if necessary—but *don't—let—him—go!* Got me? Good! Coming, Hodges?"

" Right ! "

With revolvers in one hand, torches held aloft in the other, the detectives commenced to descend into the evil-looking pit, and in a few seconds had vanished from sight. To the two others the next few minutes seemed an eternity. They could hear nothing ; see nothing. A blackness as of the grave welled up from the gap in the floor ; a smell musty and dank assailed their nostrils. They stood there rigid ; waiting . . . listening . . . holding their breath in an agonised suspense lest someone—*something*—should emerge up those steps and steal silently upon them unawares.

Their fears were groundless however. Soon, with immeasurable relief, they heard Hugh's voice telling the other detective in which direction to walk, and in another moment the darkness was pierced by two shining jets of light. Rapid steps mounted the stairs and Hugh quickly emerged, closely followed by Hodges.

" Well . . . what did you find ? " asked Tenant eagerly. " Was there a window ? "

" There was," replied Hugh curtly, watching Hodges slip the trap door back into place once more. " At least, there was the place where a window ought to have been, only someone had removed it quite recently ; the glass was lying about in bits all round."

" And did you get any clues ? " went on Tenant. " Anything on which to work ? "

" I did," answered the other shortly.

Into Hugh's face crept a look of deep concentration ; a look which Tenant, from long experience, had learned to associate with the word "hunch." Hugh Chambers was famous for his hunches. They had brought him much honour in the past, and it was due to their surprising scarcity in the last few months that failure had seemed to dog his footsteps. But now something or other had induced a train of thought, of which the immediate result was that welcome hunch. Tenant knew his friend too well to dare to ask what that "something" was. In his own good time Hugh would enlighten him ; until then he must wait patiently, striving to probe the mystery on his own account.

"Shall we go on to the station now?" asked Hodges, turning to Hugh. "We've found out everything we're likely to here."

"Right," answered Hugh shortly, and without further ado the little party re-mounted the stairs to the ground floor, where the two constables were already waiting.

"I'll send for the body from the station," Hugh told them. "You remain here ; should anyone enter arrest him immediately."

"Very good, sir."

"Coming, everybody?"

They followed Hugh out of the grim house into the welcome brightness of the January sunshine and re-entered the car. Hodges jumped into the driver's seat and turning to Doctor Cooper, asked :

"Where would you like to be dropped, Doctor?"

"Oh—the police station will do me all right, thanks. My surgery is only a few doors away."

The detective slipped the gears into place and with a loud exultant roar the car leapt forward as though delighted to leave the neighbourhood of that sinister house. Tenant cast a last glance behind him and felt a shiver of aversion run through his body as his gaze fell on the weed covered garden, in which ruin and decay had done their evil work only too well.

THE ROPE WHICH HANGS CHAPTER IV

THE four men were very silent as they drove rapidly through the busy streets where little groups of people were gathered about, casting apprehensive glances around, obviously discussing this latest murder. On every hand posters in lurid head-lines proclaimed the tragic event and Hugh's face darkened as his eye fell on one which ran:

ANOTHER MURDER BY THE HANGING SCOURGE!

WHAT ARE THE POLICE DOING!

What, indeed? Never before had Hugh felt so completely at a loss; never before had he experienced this strange hesitation, this reluctance to pursue his deductions to their logical conclusion. The clues upon which he had stumbled in that dank, gloomy cellar should have provided a basis upon which to build a strong case; yet for the first time in his life the detective felt unconvinced; for the first time in his life he doubted his own reasoning. A frown of perplexity shadowed his face; a frown which did not vanish when they drew up at last outside the police station. The doctor clambered out first, thanked them for the lift and walked briskly along the street in the direction of his surgery. The others quickly followed him out of the car and entered the police station.

Hodges conducted them to his office, where a cheery coal fire gladdened their eyes as they entered. He motioned them to a couple of easy chairs drawn up by the hearth and sat down at his desk. Then, taking a key from an inner pocket, he unlocked a drawer and withdrew some papers.

"Here you are, Chambers," he said, handing Hugh a slip of paper, "that's what we found last night, and here are photographed copies of the other papers. You see . . . the figures are very similar. There's no doubt about it—they're all by the same hand."

Hugh examined the first paper in silence.

It was a small sheet which appeared to have been torn from a notebook. One side was all jagged and uneven. Scrawled across it in pencil were the figures twenty-three. For a long while the detective stared at it, then he suddenly looked up and rapped out a question.

"It's been examined for finger-marks?"

"Yes," answered Hodges quickly, "we sent it along for inspection yesterday, immediately it was found, but as usual there were none. This johnnie's a darned ingenious fellow; up to all the tricks of the game, I'm afraid."

Hugh stared once more at the paper in his hand, then compared the figures with those on the other sheets. There could be no doubt whatsoever but that one hand had been responsible for them all. For a while he sat lost in thought, eyes glued to the papers before him, then very slowly, very carefully, he folded up the sheet which had been found on the scene of the last murder and placed it in his pocket-book.

"And what about the girl, Hodges?" he asked, after a pause, "has her identity been traced yet?"

"Yes. We've found out who she is all right. A most respectable young woman, Emily Foster, living alone in rooms at 15, Greenford Gardens. She was an assistant in one of the draper's shops here. We've had her on our books as 'missing' for a

few days. This morning we sent for her landlady—the person who informed us about her being missing, in the first place—and she was able to identify her. Poor soul, she was terribly upset; seemed very fond of the girl."

"What was the date on which she first missed her?"

"She went out on the evening of January 14th—and never returned."

"*January 14th!*"

Hugh drew in his breath sharply; there was a curious glint in his eyes.

"Did she know where the girl went? Why she was out that evening?"

"Yes. She said Miss Foster told her she was going to the Palace Cinema. On the fourteenth we had a terrible storm here. It started about half-past eight, but the landlady said she felt it was coming and advised the girl not to go out. She seemed very anxious to see a certain film, however, and went out about seven-thirty. I've questioned the staff at the Palace, but no one appears to have noticed any girl answering her description. Whether she was attacked on the way there, or late at night when on her way home, is another point we don't know."

"This cinema. Would you have to pass number thirteen to reach it?"

"No. It's right out of the way—in the opposite direction in fact."

"Hm!" Hugh paused for a moment, tapping the arms of his chair thoughtfully with his fingers, then looking up suddenly he asked: "Had she any young man? Or any girl friend with whom she might have gone to the cinema?"

"Not as far as we can find out," answered Hodges slowly. "Her landlady swears she had no men friends at all; says she's certain she went to the pictures alone."

"Hm! Well, there's just a possibility that she might have taken shelter in the house, hoping the storm would soon blow over."

"I hardly think that's likely, Chambers," said Hodges gravely. "All these cases of murders in empty houses have made them rather unpopular spots with most people. The landlady says she was a very nervous girl, so I don't think she'd have dared to go there willingly."

Hugh nodded his head thoughtfully, then said:

"Well, what did you say her name was? Just take it down, will you, Guy? My pen's run out."

Tenant took out his pocket-book and quickly wrote down the name and address at Hodge's dictation, then he handed it to Hugh.

"Oh, keep it for a bit, old man. It's only for reference. Now, Hodges, tell me, have you had any reports about a man

behaving strangely in or near Worthing on the fourteenth of January, or a few days before or after? Have you made inquiries?"

Hodges shook his head.

"No, not yet. Haven't had much time. I will to-day, though."

"Right! Better send out a man immediately to all the houses in Laurel Avenue and tell him to inquire whether a short, rather fat man was seen about the place around that date."

"Short and fat! Good heavens, how on earth do you know anything about his appearance?" blurted out Hodges, gazing at Hugh in astonishment.

A faint smile curved the other's lips. For a moment he was silent, then he said shortly:

"It's pretty obvious the man must be short. Every victim so far has been unusually short. This girl is under five feet. Not one has been taller than five feet three. Evidently the fellow won't tackle anyone bigger than himself."

"But why fat?" asked Hodges quickly.

Hugh shook his head.

"Sorry—I can't tell you that yet."

With a shrug of his shoulders Hodges walked to the door, then paused a second and said:

"What are you going to do now, Chambers? Will you be staying down here for a day or so?"

Hugh was silent for a moment, staring fixedly into the heart of the glowing fire, then very slowly, he answered :

" No . . . no, I don't think I will, Hodges. There doesn't seem much reason for it. Should anything fresh crop up, phone me instantly and I'll come down at once, but it seems to me that there aren't likely to be any further developments in Worthing. Apparently he never uses the same town twice. I'll go along and see this landlady and then catch the next train back." Rising to his feet he shook the other warmly by the hand and added, " So I'll say good-bye, old man."

" Good-bye, Chambers . . . and good luck. Good-bye, Mr. Tenant. Delighted to have made your acquaintance."

Tenant had also jumped to his feet and now shook hands with the little detective, who with a final good-bye walked briskly from the room, leaving the others in sole possession.

Hugh pulled his chair nearer to the grateful warmth, reseated himself and drawing a cigarette-case from his pocket offered it to Tenant. The latter thanked him, selected one and lighting a match offered it to Hugh, who had also taken a cigarette. As his friend reached for it Tenant was amazed to see that his fingers were shaking violently.

" Good God, man," he cried, " what's the

matter? You mustn't take this thing so much to heart. Why, I've never seen you so nervy."

Hugh gave a short laugh in which there was no trace of humour and puffed savagely at his cigarette.

"Sorry, Guy. Afraid I'm a bit upset. But . . . well, you see, there's so much at stake this time."

Tenant looked sympathetically at the younger man, then said:

"Look here, Hugh, I think it's all the work of a secret organisation."

The other looked at him in astonishment.

"A secret organisation? Why? What d'you mean?"

"Well, in my book, 'The Mark of the Green Serpent'——" began Tenant, and Hugh gave a weary sigh, to which, however, his friend paid not the slightest attention.

Many years of friendship with the lovable, but rather eccentric, author had inured Hugh to his annoying habit of construing events, in relation to any crime which the detective might be investigating, as though they had occurred in a similar way to the fictitious happenings in his own stories. He refused to admit any disparity between the possibilities in fact and fiction, his definite opinion being that all his tales had had—or would have—their counterpart in real life some time, somewhere—which belief had played no little part in the spectacular success of his

books. It lent to his pen that convincing touch which never fails to please. Despite frequent attacks of boredom and impatience Hugh had never attempted to cure his friend of this failing, as on many occasions he had dropped valuable hints for which the detective was deeply grateful. So now, although a feeling of weariness had overcome him at the familiar opening, Hugh leant back resignedly in his chair and forced himself to listen.

"Well," he asked, in a patient voice, "what happened in your book?"

"Six men who were unable to get work and who, therefore, considered they had a grudge against all mankind, also that the world was over-populated, banded themselves together into a secret organisation pledged to dispose of one person a week. Each member was given his allotted task once in every six weeks. A green serpent, made of tiny beads, was found fixed round the neck of the victims—the mark of the society. They were always killed in the same way—throttled—and always on a Sunday. Don't you see the resemblance?"

With eager face Tenant turned to Hugh, who smiled indulgently, but said:

"Sorry, old man, can't say that I do."

"Well, don't you see," urged the other earnestly, "all these people are killed in the same way, all at about the same time and in every case a paper is left with numbers on

it. Isn't it obvious ? These numbers stand for the signatures of each member. Don't you see ? "

Hugh's brows knitted together for a moment. Such an explanation of the mysterious slips of paper had never occurred to him before. A gleam of hope brightened his face ; it was as though he had shed some frightful weight. He stared at his friend in silence, then speaking very slowly, each word seeming to be dragged reluctantly from between his lips, he murmured softly, " I wonder . . . If only . . . I wonder."

" Well, it *is* possible, isn't it ? " urged Tenant, obviously pleased with the way in which his suggestion had been received. " Why don't you get to work on those lines ? It's perfectly feasible."

" Perhaps I will," answered Hugh, taking a last pull at his cigarette. He threw the stump into the fire, then paused for some time, gazing before him in deep thought. At last, rising to his feet, he looked at his friend.

" Let's have the address of that girl, Guy. I'm going along now to interview the landlady."

Tenant handed him his pocket-book and Hugh noted the address.

" Fifteen, Greenford Gardens. Wonder whereabouts that is. Anyway it shouldn't take long by taxi. Coming with me, Guy, or would you prefer to wait here ? "

" Lord no. I'm coming all right," cried

Tenant, jumping briskly to his feet, "I'm imbibing valuable data, old man. Methods of police officer dealing with refractory landlady. Not that she will be refractory necessarily, but you've only to read my books to know that they usually are."

Hugh laughed and rose slowly from his chair.

"Well, in that case, old man, you'll be able to give me some hints."

He moved to the door, opened it and led the way down some stairs into the street. A cold wind had sprung up and both men shivered as they stood on the kerb, watching for a taxi to come into sight. Fortunately they had not long to wait, and in a few minutes were being driven rapidly along to number fifteen Greenford Gardens.

THE ROPE WHICH HANGS — CHAPTER V

THE rain was falling in a steady downpour when the Worthing express puffed noisily into Victoria. His spirits in complete accord with the depressing weather, Hugh accompanied Tenant out of the station into the dreary streets. Their visit to the landlady had thrown no further light on the murder of Emily Foster. She only repeated what had already been told to Inspector Hodges,

and after an interview which lasted barely ten minutes the detective took his leave, realising that the woman knew nothing likely to be of the slightest interest. The incessant downpour did not tend to brighten his outlook, and with a shudder of discomfort Hugh hailed a taxi, into which the two men quickly clambered, giving the driver Tenant's address.

"I'll drop you there, first," said Hugh, "then go on to the Yard. Tell Pam that I'll be along some time to-morrow. You'll be in, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes," answered Tenant, "deep in work, I hope. I ought to have got some good copy out of all this."

Hugh laughed cheerlessly.

"I only hope you've got more out of it than I have, old chap."

He relapsed into a dismal silence until they arrived at Tenant's house.

"Good-bye, Hugh, and cheer up. You're bound to get on to the fellow soon. Don't forget to think over that idea of the secret society."

"Right. I'll give it my immediate attention," said the detective, forcing a jocular tone. "Cheerio, old man, and thanks for coming."

He watched his friend dart quickly up the garden path; watched while the door was opened immediately in reply to his knock, and sighed with annoyance when he saw a figure neatly attired in cap and apron

silhouetted in the doorway. His luck was dead out. A sight of Pamela's dainty features —even the merest glimpse—would have done much to lighten his spirits, but it was not to be. With an inward groan Hugh turned to the driver.

"Scotland Yard, please—and drive as fast as you can go."

He leaned back wearily on the thick cushions and gazed with disgust at the drenched streets. One thought was uppermost now. To reach his cosy office, to pile coal on the fire and saturate himself in creature comfort; then settle down to think over the doings of this depressing day.

In less than ten minutes his goal was accomplished and with a heartfelt sigh of relief Hugh shut his door and sank into a deep arm-chair by the fire. He had given instructions that he was not to be disturbed unless an urgent message came through from Worthing, and with the prospect of complete freedom from interruption his tiredness vanished. He felt alert, invigorated. With fingers, clumsy in their eagerness, he searched in an inner pocket and withdrew four articles which he proceeded to examine minutely. The frown which had never left his face all day seemed deeper than ever as, at last, his inspection completed, he opened a drawer in his desk and carefully placed them in it. Then, after locking it, he attached the key

to an already considerable bunch which he slipped into his waistcoat pocket.

For long hours, while the rain continued its ceaseless downpour; while the wind howled drearily in the chimneys and the contents of the coal box rapidly diminished, the young detective sat with eyes staring into space, thinking . . . thinking . . . weaving together supposition and fact, building up one theory only to destroy it the next instant for another more plausible.

The daylight gradually gave place to night; electric lights made patches of brightness in the prevailing gloom. The noises of traffic lessened by slow degrees until only a stray taxi rumbled quickly past carrying home some belated reveller; yet still Hugh Chambers sat smoking cigarette after cigarette, making occasional notes in his pocket-book, but for the most part staring unseeingly in front of him . . . and ever increasing on his face a look of incredulous horror.

THE ROPE WHICH HANGS CHAPTER VI

"WELL, how's the writing going?" asked Pamela. "Inspirations pouring in by the dozen?"

Her father laughed gently.

"Not so bad at all, Pam. Got on amazingly well in fact."

"That's good. Hugh rang up this morning but I told him you were busy and that my life wouldn't be worth a cent if I disturbed you before lunch time."

"Did he leave any message?"

"Yes. He said that when you'd finished I was to ask you to phone him."

A gleam of excitement lit up Tenant's sensitive features.

"Good Lord. I wonder whether he's got any more news. I haven't seen him for three weeks. I'll phone him at once."

"No, no, no. Finish your lunch first, dear," commanded Pamela imperatively. "It'll get cold otherwise, and I don't think it's particularly urgent. Hugh didn't seem to give that impression, anyway."

"Oh, very well, my dear," said Tenant resignedly; then with a roguish glance at his daughter he added: "What it is to be henpecked!"

This was the familiar opening for an exchange of good-natured banter, in which Tenant, as usual, was hopelessly outmatched.

"All right, all right," he cried at last, pushing his chair back hurriedly and moving to the door. "You win—as always! A woman's tongue is like the brook—they both go on for ever!"

He opened the door quickly, just in time to avoid a small pellet of bread very adroitly aimed in his direction, shut it noisily, then going to the telephone picked up the receiver.

After the usual preliminaries Hugh's voice, calm and deliberate, answered his query.

"Yes. It's me all right. How d'you feel after your work? Tired?"

"Not a bit," replied the other. "Never fresher. Got to work splendidly this morning, too."

"Good. Are you going on working this afternoon?"

"Don't think so. Well's run dry for a bit. Why? Any bright scheme on foot?"

"I wondered whether you'd care to come with me. I'm going along to Brighton to see the spot of one of the other murders. I've been there already, of course, only I've got a . . . well, I might almost call it a hunch, and I'm going to examine the place again for any possible clues. Coming? We might even tackle Newhaven as well. We'll go in my car and be independent of trains. What d'you say?"

"Rather! I'd love to. Would it be indiscreet to ask whether the hunch has any reference to my idea of a secret society?"

There was a short pause, then Hugh said slowly, rather gravely:

"Well, it's not wholly unconnected, old man."

"Good. The plot thickens! What time are we going? Will you call for me?"

"Yes. I'll come along immediately. Will that be all right?"

"Fine. So long then."

Tenant was just about to ring off when Hugh's voice came quickly over the wire.

"Oh, and I say, Guy, you might bring a tooth-brush with you. We may have to put up for the night."

"Right. It shall be done. Cheerio!"

There was a smile of pleasant anticipation on Tenant's face as he returned to the dining-room.

"Prepare me my harness, daughter mine," he commanded jovially, "for I must away on dangerous hazards."

Pamela looked up in surprise.

"Away? Why? Where are you going?"

Her face paled as she added:

"There hasn't been *another*, has there, Dad?"

Tenant hastened to reassure her and explained Hugh's plans.

"I really think he's got hold of some important clue this time, my dear. Only hope so. Heaven knows he deserves it."

At this moment a powerful Sunbeam drew up at the door and proceeded to make the afternoon hideous with ear-splitting honks.

"Gracious—here he is," cried Tenant. "For goodness sake, Pam, tell him to stop that frightful racket while I get ready."

He darted from the room and Pamela hastened out to convey his sentiments. One glance at the young detective's face, however, drove all thoughts of playful rebuke from her mind.

"Good heavens, Hugh," she cried in astonishment. "You look terribly tired and worried. Anything the matter? I mean other than all this?"

Hugh glanced up at her quickly. He looked very white and haggard. Deep lines under his eyes bore witness to a sleepless night. His brows were knit together in a frown of anxiety, but at her first words he forced a smile and answered brightly.

"No—only this business, Pam. I haven't had much sleep lately working it all out."

"But daddy says you've got a clue. Is that right? Do you think you're on the track at last?"

The young man's lips tightened. He stared before him in silence for a while, then answered gravely:

"Well . . . yes, I think I am."

"Oh, I'm so glad," cried the girl earnestly. "Wouldn't it be wonderful, Hugh, if you cleared the whole thing up this time. Like coming out of a nightmare."

"Yes," he muttered slowly, as though to himself, "like coming out of a nightmare."

Then turning suddenly to the girl he seized her hands and said very gently:

"And Pamela—if I do—will you——" he stopped abruptly, but his eyes sought hers pleadingly.

A soft blush added a further charm to the girl's distinctive beauty. Her eyes shone radiantly; a happy smile parted her lips.

" Well," she murmured ; " will I——? "

" Pamela, my dear, will you——"

But again he broke off, this time because Guy Tenant had appeared in the open doorway and was now rapidly approaching them down the path.

" Afternoon, Hugh," he called cheerily. " Goodness, you're looking a bit whacked to-day, old man. What's the cause ? Work or wine ? "

Hugh laughed and making room for him at his side, answered banteringly :

" You can't ail on bitter, my friend, which by now you ought to know is all I ever drink."

" Heavens ! It's worse than I thought," grumbled Tenant. " Well, I only hope it won't affect your driving. Good-bye, Pamela, darling. Take care of yourself. I'll phone you if we're going to stay the night."

" Good-bye, dear. Good-bye, Hugh—good luck," cried the girl.

" I'll be along to see you to-morrow, Pam," said Hugh, starting up the car. " Sometime in the afternoon. Will you be in ? "

" Perhaps — who knows ? " she laughed softly and stood by the gate watching, until they disappeared from sight round a corner. Then, very slowly, she walked back into the house.

The two men spoke little during the ninety minutes run down to the coast. Tenant gazed appreciatively at the country-side, now

covered with a thick powder of white frost. He puffed luxuriously at a cigarette and wrapping the rugs closer around him, began revolving in his mind the plot of a new novel. Hugh, with eye intent on the road in front, gave to his duties of driver just sufficient application to ensure speed and safety; the remainder of his mind being busy with the terrible mystery which had baffled him so long, to which he now believed he possessed the key.

The lines in his forehead deepened as he pondered over the few clues he already held, the slenderness of which might have caused him to ignore their importance had it not been for the strange persistence of his "hunch"; that sixth sense, almost allied to the power of intuition which many women possess, a power which men ridicule in public but inwardly hold in deep respect.

Dusk was already beginning to fall when they reached the outskirts of the town. A sea mist shrouded the land in a grey haze, hanging about the road in thick masses of vapour. Tenant shivered slightly at the cheerless outlook, but in Hugh's eyes eagerness banished the fatigue—the moment for action had come. He drove cautiously along in the direction of the sea, down the parade between the two piers and turned up West Street. He passed the station, turned to the left and after going through what appeared to be a maze of little streets, drew up

at last outside a ramshackle four-storied house, which needed no boards to announce its emptiness.

Rather reluctantly Tenant clambered out of the car. He was a great lover of creature comfort and the cold dreariness of the house depressed him. Yet he quickly followed Hugh through the gate, along a path, up some steps to a dilapidated front door which the latter opened with a rusty key. They entered and Hugh pulled it to behind them, causing a loud bang to shatter the dead silence of the house. A musty smell greeted them as they stood in the tiny hall where paper hung in strips from the walls. That sense of ominous expectancy which seems incidental to every unoccupied house, sent a feeling of something akin to apprehension through the two men; a ridiculous feeling that someone had heard them enter, that in one of those bare rooms someone was watching, waiting his opportunity to pounce upon them unawares.

Shrugging his shoulders as though to rid himself of the disagreeable thought, Hugh withdrew a torch from his pocket and flashed it into the sinister blackness. Holding it before him so that a circle of light accompanied his passage, he led the way down the corridor to a room on the left and opened the door. They walked in. They were in a very small room about which there was nothing of particular

interest, saving two french windows set in the wall opposite the door. Hugh gazed around the place curiously for a while, as though seeking something, then turning to his companion, said :

" I *think* this was where the body was found. Can't quite remember, though. You didn't come with me when I was called here, did you ? "

Tenant shook his head.

" No. I was away at the time, I think. But surely you remember ? "

A frown of bewilderment overshadowed Hugh's features. He examined the door and windows carefully, flashing his torch in every direction.

" Well," he said at last, " I've had to investigate in nine different empty houses—and empty houses are all very similar. Still I know there was a hook somewhere—and there isn't one here, so it can't be this room."

He walked to the door and out into the hall again, then said :

" You look down here, Guy, and I'll do the rooms upstairs. If you see anything likely, give me a shout. Here's a torch, I always carry two."

Hugh handed Tenant a torch similar to his own and ascended the stairs to the first floor. After a cursory examination of each room he mounted to the next story, inspected the rooms there and turned to descend again. Suddenly his hand flew to the re-

volver in his pocket. He had heard a sound, the unmistakable sound of a man's breathing. He could see nothing and did not dare to flash his torch. To do so would have given the other—whoever it was—too great an advantage. He waited in tense suspense; every nerve taut and on guard. Then suddenly a hand gripped his shoulder. He flashed his torch immediately into the blackness just where he judged the other's eyes should be . . . and stared speechlessly into the surprised and somewhat startled face of his friend.

With a nervous laugh Hugh slipped the pistol back into his pocket and cried:

"God, man, but you *did* frighten me. These empty houses get on one's nerves after a while . . . and I thought you were down on the ground floor."

Tenant smiled apologetically.

"Awfully sorry, Hugh. Fact is, I was a bit startled too. Wasn't sure it was you. These houses *do* get on one's nerves. Mine were getting a bit frayed down there. I think I've found the room and I tried to shout but somehow dreaded to break this silence. Listen!"

He stood motionless and Hugh could not restrain a shiver. The silence was absolute . . . awe-inspiring . . . formidable. They might have been a thousand miles from any other human being; a thousand miles from the reassuring babble of human tongues.

And it was in this house that a ghastly murder had been committed ; in this silence a frenzied boy had yelled in vain for help.

" Come on," said Hugh shortly, and followed Tenant down the stairs to the ground floor where the latter led him to a room in the front of the house.

" I should think it was here, Hugh," whispered Tenant. " Look ! "

He moved to a cupboard which stood in a corner of the room, flung it open and, with a shaking hand, pointed to a row of clothes hangers fixed in the top.

" Of course. I remember now," said Hugh quickly. " It was in there . . . attached to the middle one."

He carefully examined the bottom of the cupboard, flashing his torch into every nook and cranny.

" Hold your light up above, old man," he said at last. " I can't see much with mine."

Tenant obeyed and Hugh renewed his search, brushing away with his handkerchief the dust which thickly covered the boards. Suddenly he gave a gasp and probed carefully into a crack in the floor.

" What is it ? " cried Tenant excitedly, " Got a clue ? "

A frown of disappointment clouding his face, Hugh rose to his feet, holding in his hands a used match.

" Afraid not. Thought I'd got something that time. Well," he added, after shutting

the cupboard door again, " it's no use our staying here any longer, Guy. What about a spot of dinner at ' The Ship ' ? "

" Excellent idea," replied Tenant, brightening up visibly. " Never felt more like it in my life. This house gives me the creeps."

" And me. Come on."

Hugh led the way out, banged the door to behind them and started up the car. With a sigh of relief Tenant climbed inside and buried himself in the rugs. Twenty minutes later they were seated in comfort before a roaring fire, showing, in approved fashion, their appreciation of good food.

" Rather a waste of time, old man," said Tenant, helping himself to a piece of succulent pork. " Not much use our staying the night, is it ? "

Hugh gazed thoughtfully at the fire.

" Oh, I don't know," he said at last. " I think we'd better. We can do the house in Newhaven to-morrow morning and I'll drop you at your place in the afternoon. Will that be all right ? "

Tenant nodded.

" Quite. I'll phone Pam directly we finish. In the meantime . . ."

He waved his hand significantly at their empty glasses, then beckoned to the waiter.

THE grandfather's clock was striking three when a loud knock on the outer door disturbed the reverie into which Pamela had fallen. For the last hour she had reclined lazily in an easy chair drawn close to the fire, but now, with heightened colour, she jumped to her feet, proceeded to smooth her hair and to apply powder to a nose already guiltless of any shine—in obeisance to that time-honoured custom of womankind. She waited eagerly for the knock to be answered, her eyes fixed on the door, standing with her back to the fire in an attitude of unconscious grace.

As Hugh Chambers entered, after tapping gently for admittance, he could not restrain a gasp of admiration. The girl made a very charming picture leaning there in her deep blue frock against the black oak of the mantelpiece ; a picture which caused him to ignore the preliminaries he had carefully rehearsed all the way up ; to forget everything save the purpose of his visit.

" Pamela ! "

He took a quick step forward and seized her in his arms.

For a long while he gazed into her eyes which smiled up at him, full of a mysterious radiance ; then, kissing her gently, he murmured very softly :

"You love me, Pam? You'll marry me?"

For answer the girl kissed him again, and so for a long while they remained, explaining to each other eagerly—as is the way with lovers the world over—when it was they first began to care; how much they cared; how wonderful that *she* should care for *him* (from Hugh); how marvellous that *he* should care for *her* (from Pamela) and so on . . . until the firelight began to serve a dual purpose, that of illumination as well as warmth—and the clock in the hall chimed five.

"Good gracious . . . it's five o'clock already," cried Pamela. "I wonder where Daddy is? Where did you leave him, Hugh?"

"Oh, he came along with me, dearest," said Hugh. "I expect he's in his study. He said he'd get on with some work . . . and wished me luck. I told him I wanted to see you alone—and why!"

Pamela laughed joyously; then she rose quickly to her feet:

"I think it's time we fetched him along, broadcast the good news and had some tea, don't you?"

"Yes, darling, but just a moment. There's something I want you to promise me, Pamela . . . something you *must* promise. It's terribly important."

Hugh spoke very seriously now and the happiness died out of the girl's face as she saw how pale and solemn he had become.

" Why—what is it, Hugh ? " she asked, breathlessly. " There's no . . . trouble, is there, dearest ? "

Hugh smiled and shook his head, but there was a strange urgency in his voice when he answered :

" No, there's no trouble, Pam . . . not as yet, only . . . well, promise me, dear, that whatever happens it won't alter things between you and me. You'll stick to your promise . . . marry me, Pam, in spite of everything. *Promise !* "

He was speaking with grave intensity and the girl stared at him in amazement.

" Hugh, dear, of course. Nothing will alter things. But . . . what could alter them ? Are you afraid of anything ? "

For a moment the man was silent, staring into the heart of the fire ; then he spoke very slowly and jerkily, the words seeming to be dragged unwillingly from his lips :

" Oh . . . I don't know, Pam. It's all this business. If I should fail . . . or anything like that . . . I suppose I'm getting too anxious. I'm like a miser—afraid of losing my newly-grasped happiness . . . Anyway, you *promise*, Pam ? Nothing shall come between us ? "

The girl, relieved, laughed softly.

" Why, you silly, of course I promise ! But you mustn't give me shocks like that, dear. I thought there really was something to worry about. Let's go and tell Daddy. Come on."

She pulled him to the door and stopped a moment for one last kiss, then opening it quickly they walked into the dining-room where, beside a table attractively laid for tea, sat Guy Tenant. He glanced questioningly at them, then smiled with pleasure at the answer written on their faces. Jumping up he shook Hugh by the hand and kissed Pamela tenderly.

"I'm so glad, so very glad," he said at last. "It's what I've always hoped and prayed for. Oh, dear . . ."

He broke off to wipe away the tears of pleasure which filled his eyes.

It was a strange meal which followed. Pamela, radiant and sparkling; her father, like a child, bubbling over with delight and excitement; Hugh, talking and laughing gaily—seemingly as merry as a betrothal feast should be. And yet . . . to a casual observer Hugh's gaiety might have appeared too unrestrained. There was about it a nervous abandon which might have suggested a certain lack of spontaneity; a determined effort to hide something . . . something which would have brought care and sorrow into that company. An unnatural colour burning in his cheeks, his eyes gleaming brightly, Hugh talked on incessantly, making jokes, telling funny anecdotes, talking . . . talking . . . until the last cup had been drunk, the last bun eaten, and the little maid came in to clear away. Hugh got up

then, glanced at his watch and turning to Tenant said quietly :

" Well, Guy, I'm sorry to drag you off again, but you said you'd see me through this and I think we'd better be off."

Pamela glanced at Hugh in surprise, and with disappointment clouding her pretty face she asked anxiously :

" But, Hugh, you're not going ? Why ? What's the hurry ? "

The young detective's face was very set. He avoided meeting her glance as he answered quickly :

" I'm terribly sorry, dear, but I must get this business over. I'd no right to be here the whole afternoon, you know, Pam. Been playing truant and I must make up for it to-night."

" But Daddy ? Must he go too ? It's so lonely with no one."

Hugh paused a moment, then said quietly :

" I'm sorry, darling, but I'm afraid so. He's been a very great help to me, Pam and "—he noticed that Tenant had slipped from the room, and seizing the girl in his arms whispered tenderly—" the sooner it's over the sooner to marry, darling. You *do* see the necessity, don't you ? "

" Of course I do, dear," murmured Pamela ; then eagerly, " But where are you going now, Hugh ? "

" Down to Eastbourne."

" *Eastbourne ?* But isn't it rather late ? "

"Well, yes, it is a little, but I thought we could get there to-night, see this house, then push off first thing in the morning to Hastings."

"Will you be back to-morrow? Back here I mean?" asked Pamela wistfully.

"Yes—sometime in the afternoon. I've got to call in at the Yard, but we'll have to go off again in the evening."

"You ready, Hugh?"

A cheery voice at the door broke in on their conversation, and Guy Tenant bustled in, carrying two tartan travelling rugs over his arm.

"I intend to be warm to-day," he said laughingly. "One rug is good, but I'm thinking three are better. Well, good-bye, Pam, dear. Take care of yourself. I seem to spend my time saying good-bye to you nowadays."

"You do," said the girl ruefully, then twining her arm in his she walked with him to the door. "I'm going to see you into the car, dear. Make sure you're comfortable."

They walked into the street and up to the car which was drawn close to the kerb, a great rug covering the radiator. Hugh quickly started the engine, and slipping into the driver's seat watched while Pamela carefully tucked the rugs round her father. She then came to him and murmured softly:

"Good-bye, Hugh."

"Good-bye, darling. Take care of yourself," he whispered, and seizing her hands kissed them lightly.

In another instant the great car leapt forward. With tear-dimmed eyes Pamela stood staring into the night; the night which had swallowed up the two beings who represented her world. In spite of her new-found happiness, she now felt utterly alone and miserable. Yet had that veil which so mercifully hides the future been withdrawn for one moment: had she seen the circumstances of her next meeting with Hugh Chambers: her misery and loneliness would have been increased a hundredfold — the sudden shock might have brought despair.

THE ROPE WHICH HANGS CHAPTER VIII

"WELL, good-bye, Hugh, for the present. Ring me up when you're ready and I'll come along."

"Right. I expect it will be somewhere about five o'clock. Cheerio!"

Tenant, leaning out of the taxi window, gave his friend a last handshake, then settled back wearily on the cushions. He was feeling rather tired. For the last two days he had been travelling a great deal and, as far as he could see, to no purpose. Their visits—last night to the grim house at Eastbourne, this morning to that at Hastings—had supplied no further clues, and Tenant was frankly becoming rather bored with the fruitless journeys. He thought with pleasure

of his cosy study and determined to put in a good afternoon's work.

As the taxi drew up at his home Pamela came running out, a smile of welcome lighting up her face.

"Oh, I *am* glad you've got back so soon, Daddy, but"—her face dropped a little as she saw that he was alone—"where's Hugh? Didn't he come with you?"

"Yes, dear, but he's gone on to the Yard to do some work. He'll ring me about five, though, as we're going off again."

"Bother!" the girl sighed heavily, "I do so wish this business was over."

"So do I, Pam." Her father's voice was almost wistful. "I want to get on with my work. But I promised Hugh—and anyway I can do some this afternoon."

He slipped his arm round the girl's waist and they walked quickly into the house.

Ten minutes later Guy Tenant relaxed happily. The door of his study was shut, on his desk lay a pile of clean foolscap, pens, ink and blotting-paper were close at hand, and before him stretched three hours wherein he might rely on being undisturbed. Guy Tenant gave a contented sigh and started to write:

THE MARLOW MURDERS

CHAPTER XI

A bitter wind lashed the bare branches of the trees; rain fell steadily from a storm-

racked sky; jagged streaks of lightning followed by resounding claps of thunder, in dread partnership, filled the night with danger and discord. On such an evening only the most urgent business could drag a person out of doors; only matters of deadly moment induce the forsaking of a cheerful fire. An evening on which to walk sharply, seeking to regain the shelter circumstance had forced one to resign; certainly not a night on which to stroll leisurely along, standing at times to gaze in idle contemplation of any solitary passer-by.

Yet this appeared to be the occupation of an old man who, clad in a great overcoat and Homburg hat drawn well over his face, seemed insensible to all the vagaries of wind and storm; seemed, indeed, elated by their fury.

Peter Marlow threw back his head and gazed in ecstasy at the heavenly pageant; he sniffed the air with delight. It filled him with an insane glee. Over his crazy brain the moon had once more asserted its evil power. Here was a maniac dangerous and crafty; a human being bereft of humanity, possessed with the desire to kill. He sauntered slowly along seeking his prey, a devilish cunning bidding him bide his time and await a suitable victim; one not likely to overtax his brutal strength.

As though in outraged protest against such fiendish deeds the storm increased in fury,

filling May Summers with an agony of fear and horror. She ran blindly along the slippery road, her mind full of bitter self-reproach. If only she had heeded kind old Mrs. Green's warning; if only she had remained at home, she might now be safely tucked up in bed instead of dashing madly along, soaked to the skin and cowering in despair and terror at each startling flash, every deafening roar. As she turned a corner another sound came to her ears; a human voice in trembling accents commanded her attention. She glanced round and saw an old man facing her, hunched up within the shelter of a great overcoat. He had a stick in his hand with which he tapped before him on the pavement, and with a pang of pity the girl saw that he was blind.

"Who's there?" came a quavering voice, low and deep. "In God's name help me, whoever you are."

Her own terror vanished at the sight of this greater suffering. She stopped on the instant and said:

"What's the matter? Tell me. I'll help you if I can?"

"God be praised, miss," the old man cried shakingly. "I'm blind and I've lost my way. It's a terrible night to be out in. For pity's sake see me home."

"Of course I will," cried the girl quickly. "Tell me where you live. Anywhere near here?"

"Yes, miss. In Poplar Avenue, number nine," he said thankfully. "I know it's quite near here, but I'm not sure of the direction. Do you know it?"

"Oh, yes. It's only a few minutes away," cried the girl, taking his arm. "Quick. It's getting worse. Come on."

Clutching her coat closer to her with one hand she hastened the old man along, her own terror forgotten for the moment. Had she been able to see her companion's eyes, to read the meaning of the ugly gleam in them, her fears would have returned with redoubled force; perhaps her life might have been saved. But no thought of peril other than that of the elements entered her head. She felt nothing but deep pity for the unfortunate man who must suffer the horrors of the storm with the additional agony of blindness. She hastened him up one road, down another, then entered Poplar Avenue and started scanning the numbers of the houses. They started at one and in a few seconds, after passing three more, the last of which was empty, she saw they had arrived at number nine.

"Here it is," she cried loudly, her voice raised in an ill-matched duel with the blustering wind. "Shall I take you up the path or will you be all rght?"

She had been looking at the house, noting the absence of any light, but now, surprised at receiving no answer, she turned her gaze on her companion . . . and shrank back in

dumbfounded terror. Gone was the gentle-faced old man who had solicited her aid; in his place stood a raving maniac with distended eyes glaring into hers, with gibbering lips and dishevelled hair blowing about wildly in the wind. But it was the eyes which mesmerised her; the eyes which she had believed to be sightless but which she now saw were only too much alive. Gleaming like coals of fire they seemed to sear into her brain; to sap all her reason; to hypnotise her into complete submission. Fighting frantically against the terrible inertia which began to overpower her limbs, the frightened girl gave one despairing cry and tried to dash away. The other was too quick for her, however. With hands of steel he dragged her back, picked her up lightly as though she weighed no more than a feather and carried her—one hand pressed tightly over her mouth—down the street to the empty house.

Here he stood for a moment, cast a quick glance up and down the road, then pushing the broken gate open with his foot, he ran lightly along the garden path to the side of the house. Bending down among some privet bushes he thrust open a small window; a window which had been hidden from sight by the overhanging branches. It was obvious that he knew the place well. Holding the girl tightly in his arms, one hand still pressed over her mouth, he seized a heavy stone and crashed it through the window. There was a sound of

breaking glass, and stooping down he examined the hole; a look of evil satisfaction lighting up his face as he saw that there was room for him to enter. He turned to the almost fainting girl and in a voice of inhuman savagery hissed:

"One sound and I crush the life out of you. Understand?"

The girl nodded helplessly and he threw her heavily to the ground, then with one hand searched feverishly in his pockets; the other all the time remaining clenched on her wrist. For a few seconds he continued his search and at last withdrew two strange looking objects which he proceeded to slip over his boots. They were goloshes made of straw, neatly fitted to cover the soles of his feet, tied to his boots with strong elastic. His hands were covered with thick gloves which seemed to hinder his movements slightly. Seizing the frantic girl once more in his arms he lifted her through the window and jumped out of sight into what was obviously a cellar. The drop was not far and in spite of his burden he did not lose his balance. The room was pitch black, however, and taking a box of matches from his overcoat pocket he lit one and sought the direction of the door.

The jet of light lit up the features of the frantic girl. Her eyes were shut, her breath coming in gasps from beneath clenched teeth. She looked barely conscious; driven insensible with overpowering fear. The man gazed at her

a moment, an ugly gleam intensifying the madness in his eyes, then blowing out the match and throwing it away he darted quickly along a short passage, up some narrow stone steps and pushed open a trap door at the top. The girl still held firmly in his arms, he clambered out into the inky blackness of a kitchen. Without pausing for an instant he moved straight to the door, up some stairs, along a passage and into a room on the ground floor.

Here he lifted the girl into another position which left both his hands free, and after searching again in his pocket, withdrew a coil of thick, strangely meshed rope. She cast an anguished glance at the menacing object, then gave a yell of despair and horror. She knew now what fate had in store for her ; she knew now into whose hands she had fallen. The Hanging Maniac whose victims numbered a score or more—the Hanging Maniac for whom the police throughout England had searched for months in vain.

An ugly snarl answered her despairing cry and he seized her violently by the throat, his long fingers clutching her neck, squeezing the very life out of her. For a second her eyes stared wildly into his ; then with a stifled gasp the girl fainted. Quickly slipping the noose round her neck he knotted it carefully at the back, then attached it to a hook on the door. The altered posture caused the blood to flow from her head, and for a second she regained consciousness.

His features made hideous by their expression of satanic ferocity, Peter Marlow touched the stop key on his watch, pulled the noose tight and stared at the girl gloatingly while her life ebbed slowly from her body. Her gasps suddenly ceased; he glanced once more at his watch, and taking out a pocket-book tore from it one leaf on which he wrote hurriedly in pencil. The figure he jotted down was twenty-three—the number of seconds which he had noted by his stop-watch it had taken the girl to die. This was his unfailing habit—one which had given the police endless hours of perplexed thought. Crumpling up the paper into a ball he threw it on the floor, darted to the door, flung it open and banged it to behind him. He rushed quickly down the corridor to the stairs, descended them noiselessly, entered the kitchen, lifted the trap and slipped down the steps into the cellar. Here he removed his straw goloshes, crammed them into his pocket and clambered out through the broken window. He ran down the garden path, vaulted the stone wall and stood for a moment gazing back at the house. With a wild cruel laugh he fled down the road and vanished into the night.

The wind howled, the lightning and thunder continued their formidable concert and in the empty house a sinister form swung gently to and fro from a hook on the door.

Guy Tenant threw down his pen and stared before him with thoughtful eyes. On

his face there was a strange look, a look of puzzled perplexity. He sat for some time deep in thought, then picking up the papers on his desk read them through slowly, pausing now and again to insert a correction. For a long while he sat thinking, then opening the drawer of his desk searched rapidly for a moment, and withdrew a little leather covered diary. He turned the pages with eager fingers and at last stopped at one which he read carefully. His face was ashen as he turned the pages over again and stopped once more to read a certain item. He continued this throughout the book, stopping at intervals to read its contents. Suddenly, as he neared the end, his glance fell on his watch. For a second he stared at it as though transfixed, then with a terrible cry—full of agony and despair—he pitched forward on his desk . . . unconscious.

Half an hour afterwards Guy Tenant lifted his head and stared about him in surprise.

"Good gracious, must have fallen asleep," he murmured; then as a soft knock came to the door he cried aloud:

"Come in."

The little serving maid entered.

"Detective Inspector Hugh Chambers wants to speak to you, sir. He's on the phone."

"Right."

Tenant got up and moved slowly to the

door. He felt incredibly tired ; felt indeed as though he had not slept for a week. Sinking into a chair near the telephone he leant his head wearily on one hand, and picked up the receiver.

" Hallo ! You there, Hugh ? Would you mind very much, old chap, if I didn't come along to-night ? I feel whacked. Just fallen asleep in the study. Had a most awful dream. I've forgotten it now, but it seems to have tired me out. What d'you say to leaving it till to-morrow ? "

There was a long pause, then Hugh replied slowly :

" Oh . . . all right, Guy. Don't come if you're tired . . . I'll ring you up to-morrow and see how you feel. Better get to bed straight away."

" I will. Awfully sorry to fall out, Hugh, but . . . the spirit is willing and the flesh weak ! Good-bye . . . to-morrow then."

" Good-bye."

Tenant hung up the receiver and only then realised that he had forgotten to ask Hugh whether he intended going on to Bognor that night or waiting for his company on the morrow.

" Oh, well, I don't suppose it matters much either way," yawned Tenant, and with one foot on the stairs he called out sleepily, " Pamela."

The drawing-room door opened and she quickly came out.

"Yes, daddy. What is it?"

"Only wanted to tell you, Pam, that I'm off to bed. Feel terribly tired. Hugh's just rung up but I told him I wasn't coming. Good night, dear."

"Good night. Would you like anything before you go? A hot drink?"

"No, nothing thanks. I'm only pining for the sheets. Good night."

He disappeared slowly up the stairs and Pamela watched him, an amused twinkle in her eyes. Then, seeing that the light was still on in the study, she walked in and started to arrange his papers which lay scattered about in riotous disorder on the desk. Tenant allowed no one to enter his sanctum save herself, so she spent the next half-hour tidying up. Unlike most authors he possessed a very legible handwriting, and after a glance at the manuscript the girl commenced to read it through; at first carelessly, then with deep interest.

The clock ticked monotonously on the mantelpiece, the wind began howling down the chimney, while with eager eyes Pamela read on, entirely engrossed; for the moment oblivious to all else.

Outside, crouched beneath a sheltering fir tree, with keen eyes and set face, a man watched the light in the study; watched it shining brightly throughout the night, until with the last strokes of four chimed slowly by Big Ben, it was put out and the house

became enwrapped in darkness. Buttoning his coat closer around him the solitary watcher remained until the first rays of dawn brightened the sky, then casting furtive glances all around, he slipped out of his hiding place and walked quickly down the road.

THE ROPE WHICH HANGS CHAPTER IX

WITH unbelieving horror, Guy Tenant realised the thing he was doing. With shaking fingers he cut the rope, lifted the body which hung limply from it and placed it on the ground, then gazed in agony at the man so near to death. His heart was full of panic, he lit a match and passed it near the colourless face. It flickered, very slightly, but still . . . it flickered. The man was alive! Working rapidly Tenant undid the knots, threw away the rope and loosened his victim's collar, then began to move the man's arms up and down in a frantic effort to assist his breathing.

Moonlight flooded the room and rested on the face of the unconscious man, which Tenant was watching in a frenzy of anxiety. His relief was almost delirious when at last he saw a faint dawn of colour enter the ashen cheeks. He placed his hand on the other's heart and felt a tiny throbbing, growing a

little stronger and more regular each instant . . . then crouching on the ground he laid his head on his arms and rocked up and down hopelessly in an agony of panic-stricken despair.

He knew now. It was he. *It was he.* The ghastly suspicion had dawned on him the afternoon before. It had been uncanny, the ease with which he had described the death of that unfortunate girl. He had seemed *to be remembering*, to be relating something he had witnessed. He recalled it all now. How he had sat thinking . . . thinking; then the sudden realisation had dawned on him that at the time of each murder he had been away from home, seeking a house somewhere on the coast for Pamela and himself; a house where they could go for summer week-ends. He remembered his horror when, on examining the diary, he found that the places where he had been were in every instance those in which a murder was discovered soon afterwards. And then the watch, his stop watch, which still pointed to twenty-three — the mysterious number found on the spot of the last crime.

Tenant wiped the sweat off his brow with trembling hands, then stared at them in loathing. Was it possible that these hands had killed nine people? With a spasm of horror he realised he was wearing thick gloves. He glanced at his feet and gave a cry of despair. Great wads of straw were

attached to his shoes. Sobbing in agony he tore them off, then stood still, staring into the darkness.

Was it possible that he, Guy Tenant, the distinguished novelist, was nothing but a vile . . . *murderer?* He felt stunned. Yet it was the truth; he knew it was the truth. Doctor Cooper had said that the moon affected people whose minds were on the borderland. For long years he had let his imagination loose; for long years he had concentrated on thrilling incidents, on scenes of violence and bloodshed . . . and in the end his brain had snapped. Of that he was certain. It was not he, Guy Tenant, who was responsible for these ghastly outrages . . . it was that *other*; that being who took charge of his mind when he was there no longer to dictate its actions; it was that *other* to whose account lay these horrors. And yet . . . what was he to do? Give himself up to the police? Admit his attacks of lunacy and be locked up? And what of Pamela if he did? What of Pamela with her innocence and youth soiled for ever by the degradation of his madness?

The minutes dragged slowly by as the despairing man crouched on the ground, tears of agony trickling down his white cheeks. The thought of Pamela made him remember her extraordinary behaviour that morning. She had looked pale, very tired and worried. He recalled the strange look

she had given him when he asked her whether there was any trouble ; a look full of misery and fear. And how relieved she had seemed when he had phoned to Hugh, saying he was still too tired to go with him to Bognor. Yet the whole day she had avoided him. Had lunched in her room, sending down the maid with a message to say she had a headache. *Did she suspect?* The agonising thought appalled the wretched man. How she must hate him, fear him . . . and God ! how he loved her.

A low moan broke from his lips, he sobbed unrestrainedly, the difficult, harrowing sobs of a tortured man. And for a while nothing was heard in the room but the terrible sobs and the laboured breathing of the reviving man.

Then suddenly Tenant heard a cry, agonising, heartbroken . . . and he leapt to his feet. He knew that voice, yet never had he heard it full of such bitter sorrow. Casting a quick glance at the recumbent figure, he rushed to the door and sped along the passage to an open window which led out on to a fire escape. Hardly conscious of what he was doing the little author ran madly down the iron steps to a thick clump of yew bushes in front of the house and a few yards from the door, whence the cry had come. As he neared it he heard another voice, that of Hugh Chambers, yell out in amazement :

"My God, Pamela, what are *you* doing here?"

"I . . . I followed *him*," he heard her gasp.

Then Hugh's voice again, this time thick with pain and anxiety.

"You *know* . . . then!"

With light footsteps Tenant turned the corner of the bushes . . . and found himself staring into the barrel of a vicious looking automatic held firmly in Hugh Chambers's hand. With the other he was holding the girl close to him as though to guard her from any harm.

For a long moment, a moment which separated Pamela for ever from her light-hearted youth, the three stared at each other. Tenant's eyes were tortured as they met those of the young detective, who was staring at him in misery and grief, gasping painfully as though he had been running. Pamela stood perfectly still, scarcely breathing, her eyes fixed on her father as though questioning what she saw. The silence was absolute . . . and then from the house came a muffled groan.

Instantly the spell was broken. Hugh turned to Tenant and murmured between his teeth:

"Is he dying?"

Tenant shook his head.

"No . . ." The words came haltingly, in a strained, laboured voice. "I came to . . . and cut him down. He's all right . . .

I . . . well, it's *me*, Hugh . . . I'm *mad*. I'm the . . . the murderer . . . But you know, I suppose ? "

Hugh nodded his head. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came.

Tenant continued in a low, agitated voice :

" I suspected it yesterday . . . I suppose that's why I came to my senses now . . . Must have affected me in some way . . . It's those damned books, Hugh. Always trying to think of a new plot . . . Oh, *God* ! "

He turned, and before either of them realised his purpose had vanished from sight around a corner of the house. Hugh and Pamela dashed after him immediately, but for a while the could see no means of entrance. Every door was locked ; every window bolted. They rushed all round, then suddenly stopped aghast. In the deathlike silence of the night, from one of the rooms in this forbidding house a shot had rung out . . . menacing and grim ; a blood-curdling sound which broke the echoes and filled the two listeners with an agony of fear.

" Stay here, Pamela," said Hugh quickly. " I'm going up there."

He pointed to a fire escape beneath which they were standing.

With shaking hands the terrified girl clung to his arm. The events of the night had proved too much for her nerves. She felt that were she left alone in that garden drenched with moonlight, alone outside this

tragic house, she herself would go mad with terror.

"No, no, let me come with you," she begged.

"All right. Quickly!"

Hugh was running swiftly up the steps. He stopped on reaching the top and, with revolver held firmly in one hand, bent down to enter an open window, helping Pamela in after him. They were in a large empty room, thick with dust, great cobwebs hanging in unsightly masses from the ceiling. Putting his fingers on his lips to enjoin silence, Hugh tiptoed across the floor to an open door at one end. Here he stopped and peering cautiously round, glanced up and down a dark corridor. The windows were heavily shuttered and no light penetrated into the eerie blackness. He slipped a torch from his pocket but did not light it.

"Follow me closely, dear—and don't make a sound."

The girl nodded, and in a dead silence they tiptoed along the corridor until they came to a dim outline of stairs leading down to the ground floor. To Pamela the next few moments seemed as divorced from real life as the distorted happenings in some frightful nightmare. They moved noiselessly down the stairs, surrounded by a sepulchral blackness, in a silence ominous and threatening, a silence which, the girl feared, might be broken any instant by a yell of horror or

another ominous shot. They had neared the bottom when Hugh suddenly gave a cry and flashed his torch on to a dark form which, moving with a similar quietness, had loomed up in front of him.

"Hands up or I shoot," he muttered savagely from between clenched teeth.

The torch had disclosed the features of a white-faced man whose bloodshot eyes, quivering mouth and panic-stricken expression showed him to be in the last stages of acute terror. His throat was bare, and disfigured by a cruel looking wound, black and hideous, the significance of which made the detective gasp in horror. There came a choking sob and the man crumpled up in a heap on the ground.

Hugh slipped the revolver into his pocket and kneeling down lifted up the limp form, which he carried into a room whence the moonlight, shining through unshuttered windows, was streaming out into the passage. Here he gently laid down his burden and, taking a flask from his pocket, held it to the colourless lips. In a few seconds the raw spirit had done its work. The eyelids flickered, then opened, and bloodshot eyes were staring up at Hugh—in their depths a look of terrible despair.

"It's all right, old man," whispered Hugh reassuringly. "Nothing to be afraid of now. I'm a policeman."

Incredulous relief lit up the ashen face,

and after moistening his lips once or twice, the man muttered brokenly :

" And . . . the other ? That . . . *devil* ? "

" That's what I want to know," said Hugh steadily. " Try to tell me what's happened ? Where is he ? '

" 'E strung me up . . ." said the man, speaking in breathless jerks, " somebody must 'ave cut me down . . . just now 'e comes runnin' in, sticks a revolver in me 'and and tells me to shoot 'im . . . I . . . didn't know what 'is game was . . . and 'e snatches it from me . . . rushes out an' . . . I 'ears a shot . . . then I tries to 'op it."

Hugh jumped up and murmured gently to Pamela.

" Stop here a moment, darling."

He darted out of the room and up the stairs again, flashing his torch into the darkness ahead. This time he made no effort to be silent but ran breathlessly along ; a terrible ache in his heart. He rushed into each room on that floor. All were empty. He dashed up the next flight of stairs . . . and stopped half-way. In a twisted heap, blood flowing from a frightful gash in his throat, lay his best friend, a revolver clenched firmly in one hand.

With tears blinding his eyes Hugh knelt down by the limp figure and felt its pulse.

But . . . the warped, diseased brain of Guy Tenant was for ever at rest.

THREE hours had passed since that fatal shot; three hours during which the body of Guy Tenant had been carried back in Hugh's car and laid gently down in his study among the books which it had been his joy to write; the books which in the end had wrought such havoc with his delicate brain.

The man who had so narrowly escaped falling a victim to the author's madness was now fast asleep upstairs, worn out by his fearful experience. On the way home he confessed to Hugh that he had entered the house willingly—to burgle.

"I thought 'as 'ow there might be something worth picking up," he had babbled incoherently, "I found that fire escape and climbed in. Got down to the ground floor when suddenly I 'ears someone followin'. Me 'eart was in me boots—I thought it was the cops—beggin' your pardon, sir. I ran into the front room and 'id be'ind the door. Then . . ." Here he had broken off; the thought of that moment was obviously too terrible for him to bear—"then . . . I sees 'im come in, eyes starin', lips drawn back in a 'orrible grin, wavin' a revolver about in 'is 'and. 'E shuts the door, seizes 'old of me, whips out a rope from 'is pocket and strings me up. Next thing I know 'e comes back

and ast me to shoot 'im. Then you came along."

The man was full of gratitude to the young detective. For the first time in his life he had to admit that the police had their uses. His throat was still very painful and Hugh proposed to send for a doctor early in the morning. In the meantime, fortified by good food and drink, he had been put to bed, and now lay sleeping fitfully, moaning at intervals as though, even in his dreams, he was pursued by the memory of his terrible ordeal.

Pamela and Hugh, both looking very pale and haggard, were seated in the dining-room before a newly-made fire. Hugh slipped his arms round the miserable girl and whispered tenderly :

" Dearest, it's better so. If he hadn't . . . taken his life himself . . . I should have had to arrest him. That's what I was afraid of, Pam, afraid it would ruin our love. Don't you remember how I made you promise that nothing would come between us ? "

The girl lifted a drawn face and stared at him in surprise.

" But did you know then, Hugh ? What made you suspect ? You haven't told me."

The young detective's face was very grave. He stared into the fire and answered slowly :

" Yes . . . I've suspected for a few weeks, Pamela, ever since that afternoon when your

father came with me to Worthing. We had to rush for the train . . . only just got it . . . and as we got in I asked him what the time was, thinking my watch must be slow. He couldn't see it without his glasses and leant over to show me his wrist-watch. God knows what made me notice it, but as I looked, I saw it was a stop-watch and that the stop had pointed to twenty-three—the number found near the last murder. I didn't suspect him then, of course, not till later on, but it gave me a clue to the meaning of those slips of paper. Then we got to the house "—Hugh stopped and turned to the girl at his side—" but tell me, dear, am I tiring you ? "

" No," Pamela shook her head. " No, please go on. I want to know everything now . . . then try to forget it all. Think it was just an illness . . . which it really was . . . poor darling daddy . . ."

She broke off and sobbed, but Hugh gently comforted her, and seeing that it really soothed the girl, he went on with his tale, speaking very slowly, with long pauses.

" Well, when we got to the house, as usual we could find no footprints. Guy suggested that the criminal might wear straw goloshes, tied round his feet . . . he said he'd used the idea in a book of his. It struck me as being very ridiculous and I laughed. We examined the house and couldn't find how anyone could have entered. We went down

to the kitchen and found nothing . . . were just leaving when Guy suggested—again quoting a book of his—that they might have entered through a cellar window. We couldn't find any cellar at first, then I discovered a trap door in the floor leading down to one. Hodges—the officer at Worthing—went down with me . . . and there I hit on some clues; then I first suspected . . . God knows why . . . just a sort of instinctive hunch. I often get them and they've never been wrong. I found a broken window large enough for a small man and girl to enter by. Attached to one side of the woodwork was a strip of brown and white check suiting. Obviously the man was short and fat. I found some pieces of straw on the ground and two used green matches. Therefore, a short man wearing a brown and white check suit, straw goloshes —I didn't laugh any more at Guy's suggestion —who used green matches, must have climbed in at that window. You remember, Pam, it's about a month ago since Guy wore that check suit last, and . . . he was short and fat. I didn't show Hodges what I'd found. It gave me rather a shock, but I still would have laughed the whole thing to scorn—only . . . I had that extraordinary hunch.

"We went back to the police station and I saw the slip of paper on which the murderer had written twenty-three. It was a small slip, torn from a pocket-book. I got Guy to write the girl's name in his book and

looked at it afterwards. The papers were identical . . . and there were several pages missing. He lit my cigarette for me . . . with a green match. Also, the way the knots were tied suggested a knowledge of seamanship . . . Guy had spent several years on the sea before he married. All little things, Pam, but very damning . . . and I hadn't a single other clue to go on in regard to anyone else.

"Then it occurred to me that he might do these things in sudden attacks of madness at the time of the full moon. That's why I kept him with me, dearest, these last few days . . . and nights too. I was so terrified that he might hurt *you.* When I took him down to the house in Brighton I arranged it so that he should find in which room the corpse was discovered. I pretended to have forgotten—and went upstairs. He gave me a fearful shock though. Suddenly, I was just turning to come down again when I felt an arm clutch me. I thought perhaps he'd gone mad and was about to attack me, whipped out a revolver . . . and startled poor old Guy terribly. He'd only come up to tell me that he'd found the room. The corpse had been discovered hanging in a cupboard in the front ground floor room. He took me straight to it. The cupboard was hidden in a corner, very difficult to see . . . but of course, there wasn't any proof in that. Only it all fitted—fitted too

damnably well. And in a crack on the floor of the cupboard I found another used green match.

"By this time I felt quite certain. I remembered that he'd been away from home, searching for a house somewhere on the coast, at the date of each murder. *But I hadn't a proof.* I kept him close to me until last night when he wouldn't come. I was terribly frightened for you, dear. I spent the whole night watching the house; watching the light in his study. It was on until four o'clock. He must have been working all night."

"No, he wasn't," Pamela said shortly. Hugh glanced at her in surprise, and speaking in a husky, choking voice, she added: "It was I . . . I sat there until four o'clock."

"Good heavens, dear! Why? What on earth were you doing?"

"I tidied up his papers . . . he went to bed early. Poor darling, he was so tired. Then I started to read his manuscript. I'll show it to you afterwards. It was about a crime . . . a crime identical in every way with the last murder. It gave me quite a shock. The details were so . . . so real! Then I began thinking . . . and remembered that sometimes Daddy seemed strange, especially when he'd been house-hunting. I noticed a book lying on the floor. It was his diary. I don't know what on earth prompted me, but I looked up all the dates of the

murders and found he'd been away on every one. The rest of the night . . . oh, I can't . . . I can't describe it, Hugh . . . the agony . . ."

She broke off and cried bitterly.

" And to-night, dearest," said Hugh gently ; " how did you find him to-night ? "

" I followed him, Hugh. I spent the most terrible day. Somehow I couldn't go near him. I felt afraid . . . and ashamed of myself for being afraid. Then, when he rang you up and said he wouldn't come I was so frightfully glad. I was terrified lest you suspected. Then this afternoon, or yesterday . . . it doesn't matter I heard him go upstairs to the attic. I tiptoed up and watched him coming down. He was stuffing some straw into his pocket and had the most extraordinary expression on his face . . . almost as though he was walking in his sleep. He went into his bedroom and I tiptoed up into the attic. It's a tiny place full of packing-cases. I hadn't been in it for about a year. There didn't seem to be anything strange there . . . until I opened some of the cases . . . then I nearly fainted. There were coils and coils of rope, Hugh . . . and heaps of straw. I didn't know what the straw was for, but the rope proved everything. That peculiar mesh . . ."

She choked and remained silent for a while as though living over again that ghastly moment. After a long pause she went on slowly :

"As I was looking at it I heard the front door bang. I darted to the window and saw Daddy hurrying along towards the tube. I knew the only thing to do was to follow him, dashed down, got my hat and coat and some money . . . and ran after him. I reached the station just in time to get into the same train, in another compartment. He got out at Victoria and went along to the ticket office. I followed and heard him ask for a ticket to Margate. The next train was in ten minutes, and after I saw that he was hurrying on to the platform I bought a ticket myself. Well, I got in the train . . . and out at Margate. Then he began walking. He walked for hours and hours . . . and I followed . . . until I could hardly stagger along. I suppose I ought to have told a policeman, but I couldn't, Hugh, I couldn't . . ."

"No, dear, no, of course not," murmured Hugh gently.

"I followed him for ages . . . and then lost him. I was nearly frantic. I knew if there was a murder that night it was my fault . . . and my fault only. It wasn't Daddy's. He didn't know what he was doing. I dashed madly about searching everywhere, then I suddenly saw a car drive up near that house . . . and you jump out of it. I ran along . . . and found you. But, Hugh, how did you know he was there?"

"I'd been watching your house all day,

dear. I saw him go out, followed him to the tube and saw him take a ticket for Victoria. I followed and saw him embark on the Margate train, having heard him book there. I thought it was too risky to travel with him; I raced down in my car and shadowed him from the station. I was creeping along the garden when you rushed up to me. Then Guy came . . ."

He stopped, and for a long while the two sat gazing into the fire, deep in thought, both their faces full of deep sorrow.

The first streaks of dawn were tinging the east with roseate hues. Its pale light fell on the wan face of the young girl. Suddenly Hugh drew her gently to the window. With one arm held tightly around her he pointed to the radiance in the east; the promise of a new day. A few early larks were carolling in the branches of a sycamore tree, and as she listened it seemed to Pamela that something of her misery had been driven away; that in time she would be able to forget the horrors of the last two days, remembering only the happiness before.

"Pamela, darling," murmured Hugh tenderly, "look, it's the dawn . . . the dawn of a new life for both of us . . . the dawn of a new one for Guy. Don't grieve too much, dear one. He's happy now . . . and he wouldn't want us to be unhappy. . . ."

He kissed her gently; for a long while

they stood in silence watching the morning light creep into the sky, banishing the shadows and gloom of night, and bringing with it the splendour of a new day.

BIRDS OF EVIL FEATHER

I YAWNED, and let it be recorded that this was no ordinary yawn, no gesture of impatience with the inevitable ennui of life. It was the fifth yawn in succession and had it not been for something which occurred on the same instant, that extraordinary event which was to lead me into strange company, dangerous happenings, to the very edge of that narrow line on the other side of which lies Death . . . I have no doubt it would have been followed by yet another yawn. However . . . by the luck of the gods who so graciously delight in watching over our destinies and directing our fates, the event happened, the girl entered and that sixth yawn was stillborn.

The setting for this momentous entrance was fitting enough, for I was seated in the magnificent palm-enclustered lounge of the Hotel Cosmopolitan, the latest palace which the coffers of Jewry have thrown open to the citizens of London . . . but only to those whose purses are sufficiently heavy and reputations correspondingly light to warrant their entry. For, although the Cosmopolitan had been open during scarcely three months it had already secured to itself much

comment of a not altogether enviable nature; Cosmopolitan it had been aptly christened, and cosmopolitan it was in every sense. I had been seated for less than an hour, endeavouring—with but little success—to dispel my utter boredom through the medium of cocktails and cigarettes, and during that time the nations of the earth had passed in jabbering procession before me. Yellow, enigmatic-looking Japs and Chinese; loud, arrogant American women with their check-suited consorts; dainty, amorous-looking little Parisiennes; one furtive negro; Englishmen of every class, Englishwomen of but one; a veritable League of Nations gathered beneath one roof. I wondered whether the roof felt duly honoured until I remembered that to the Cosmopolitan as to the *bourgeois riche* money *is* honour, and no one could claim its hospitality without a jingling purse.

From all of this you will gather, quite mistakenly it is my ill-fortune to confess, that I also must be blessed with the gifts of Midas, else why should I be seated leisurely sipping cocktails in such luxurious surroundings? This, as I say, is wrong. Neither my purse nor (I sincerely hope) my reputation justified my inclusion in this assembly, but business had forced me to take up temporary residence in this quarter of London, the Superbe was full, and curiosity—also, be it known, a craving for adventure—had led me

to pitch my tent within the portals of luxurious iniquity.

" Adventures to the adventurous "—so runs an old adage. Well, I had asked for excitement and I got it when I was beginning to fear that the Cosmopolitan's evil reputation had been spuriously begot. For two days, when my affairs permitted, I had haunted the lounge, lured by a yearning for the unusual be it never so lawless. For two days I had seen nothing more exciting than a motley humanity eating, drinking and behaving more or less equally uninterestingly as all other humanities . . . and I was dreadfully, terribly, utterly bored . . . of which my fifth yawn gave indisputable proof.

And then—*she* entered. She belonged to the fairer sex and therefore claims their pronoun, but in that alone was she on a par with the generality of womankind. She stood alone, this goddess, whose entrance had imbued with greater splendour the palatial lounge; the shadows cast by the palms seemed even more delectable; the marble of the ceiling, walls and floor patterned with impeccable taste; the golden pillars became rare even as the metal . . . and I was thrilled to the core of my being, as I always am, when in the presence of great beauty. For she was a beauty, this girl, tall, slim and disdainful. Her Paris toque failed to conceal the masses of auburn hair whose tint would have caused Titian to sigh

with despair. Her complexion was perfect; her lips a poem . . . and she was unaccompanied.

Seating herself in a chair within ten steps of my own, she lit a cigarette and sat, puffing daintily, staring before her with unfathomable eyes. Save for the two of us the lounge was deserted; everyone was dressing for dinner, and *we were alone.* The situation was too much for me. I had been feeling intensely lonely, this girl looked lonely. I longed to talk to her. Who knew, perhaps (loneliness had slain my modesty) she also longed for me to talk to her! I rose to my feet. She also rose. For one glorious moment I was surprised and delighted, then bit my lips with chagrin. Her face lit up . . . but it was not for me. She took two paces forward and shook hands eagerly with one of the most insignificant little men I have ever seen. Short, fat and oily-looking, clad in an ill-fitting suit of hideous tweed . . . this was the Adonis whom Beauty had selected for her smile. I sank back, crestfallen, and watched the two chat for a while —it was obvious the meeting had been arranged—then, walking quickly, with a curiously fascinating stride, the girl accompanied him up the thickly carpeted stairs—and out of my sight.

I sat and cursed my luck, then glancing at my watch saw I had ample time in which to change for dinner, so hailing the waiter I

ordered another cocktail, hoping the blend would dispel my gloom. I was smoking my second cigarette when, suddenly, I saw the girl, still attired in her outdoor things, hastening down the stairs. I was seated near the reception office, round which several new arrivals were gathered questioning the clerk. The girl walked quickly down the lounge and placed her key in the rack under No. "23." My luck was in; my room was No. "22," so we were neighbours. And then I saw a very strange thing; a thing which was done so rapidly and neatly as to leave me gasping with surprise and undecided as to how to act.

The girl placed the key on the rack and on the instant a tall, squarely-built man, who had been leaning nonchalantly against the desk as though waiting his turn to talk to the clerk, seized the key under cover of his coat which he held over his arm, and thrust it within his pocket. The action was carried out with such dexterity as to leave me doubting whether I had really seen it happen, but . . . the key no longer hung from its nail on the rack. I was the only person who had seen anything. The other people gathered around the desk were entirely immersed in their own affairs; the reception clerk too busy answering inquiries to spare attention to outside events. *I was the only person who had seen this thing.*

For a moment I felt stunned at the thought

of my responsibility; undecided as to how to act. Should I rush forward and explain the situation to the clerk, or accost the man, who was now strolling leisurely towards the stairs? Should I remain where I was and refuse to be drawn into any strange happening which might be afoot? My mind was a whirl of questions and doubts. Knowing the evil character of the hotel's guests I was loth to make a foe of one who, I felt assured, would manage to extricate himself from any delicate corner into which I might place him, putting forward a perfectly feasible excuse for his extraordinary action, and causing me to appear a stupid meddler and a fool for my pains. But, while I hesitated, the game was taken out of my hands. The moment for action passed and I had not moved. The man, walking with the same unhurried stride, had mounted the stairs and vanished from my sight.

The whole affair had happened with lightning swiftness, but with no betraying haste. I felt confused, breathless, and—in some inexplicable way—culpable. For, however I strove to deny my responsibility, the fact remained . . . I *was* responsible. No one but I had witnessed the transfer of the key from hook to pocket; no one but I could be blamed for permitting the removal to be effected.

I sat for a long while reviewing my action —or rather, lack of action—then, realising

that I had better proceed with my dressing, I wandered along to my room, pausing for a moment to glance curiously at No. "23." I was still feeling very uneasy in my mind; an uneasiness which was tinged with self-contempt. For had not adventure come tapping at my door and I had refused to answer? For two days I had been praying for something unusual to happen—it had happened and I was too prudent to interfere. It was in a very mixed mood that I commenced my dressing, craning my ears all the while for any sound which might come from the next room. But I heard none. Had the man entered the room he must have left immediately, or else the walls were exceptionally thick and quite sound-proof.

At last I decided to go down to the dining-room. I opened my door and stepped . . . into the second stage of the adventure. For the door of No. "23" was ajar. I passed slowly and stopped in astonishment. On the floor, just facing the door, lay the little, fat man whom I had seen escorting the girl, earlier in the evening, and grouped about him were two men, the proprietor, a keen-eyed little Jew, and a grave-faced Englishman, obviously a doctor. The attention of both men was fixed on an ominous-looking stain in the side of the prostrate man; a stain which was growing larger with each instant. I crept to the door, my heart beating violently, my mind full of horror, for I knew that I was

gazing on a dead man, a man who might, who *would*, I did not doubt for one moment, be living now had I done something more intelligent than merely to sip my cocktail when I had witnessed the fatal removal of the key a little while before. For that the murderer was none other than the tall man who had sauntered so leisurely up the stairs earlier that evening, I had no doubt whatsoever. He was the guilty one and . . .

I was thinking thus when a sudden movement on the part of the proprietor, a hasty glance at the door, to the side of which I quickly slipped out of sight, awakened me to the fact that were I to tell him my story it would not be listened to with any sympathy. I would be termed a boob for not acting sooner, be pestered with policemen and reporters . . . and to no good purpose. The man was dead, his murderer had escaped and it was up to me to trace his whereabouts. Not desiring to be caught peeping in on the tragic room—for nowhere is Death hushed up so passionately as in an hotel—I walked quickly down the stairs to the lounge, my mind filled with one thought. *Had the key been returned to its hook?* Whether or not this was important I did not stop to ponder. To me—were it there—it would mean but one thing. That the murderer had escaped from the hotel with the definite intention that the girl, the girl whose extraordinary beauty was still dazzling me, should

return to the room and find its occupant dead, she to become the object of deadly suspicion. By a most fortunate chance I would be able to proclaim her innocence . . . but was the key there ?

I hastened across the lounge and nearly tripped up a man who was emerging from one of the public telephone booths. Hastily apologising I rushed on . . . and then stopped dead. For in the moment of impact I had not recognised the man against whom I had fallen, but suddenly, like a flash of lightning, the realisation came to me. I turned on the instant, without casting a glance in the direction of the hook, and was just in time to see the revolving door of the hotel entrance rotating slowly. Someone had just gone through. The lounge was empty. The man I had knocked against must have departed.

I rushed to the door and out into the street. The man whom I sought was just crossing the road and, to my intense relief, I saw I had not been mistaken in the resemblance. This was the man who was responsible for that dead body in No. " 23." Slipping stealthily in his wake I followed him across the street and along the crowded pavement. He walked with the same unhurried stride and I had no difficulty in keeping him in sight. Every now and again he would pause for a moment to gaze into some shop window, but I soon found that it was no idle shop-gazing promenade on which he was

bound. Whenever he stopped it was at a corner window. He would examine the wares displayed and follow on round the corner as though to continue his examination, then proceed up that street. This he did on several occasions, sometimes darting a glance behind him, and I had considerable difficulty in escaping detection. By this time I was seething with excitement. The idea of attracting a policeman's attention and demanding the murderer's instant arrest did occur to me . . . but I brushed it aside. Far better to seize the fox in his lair. Who knows what thieves' kitchen he might lead me to, the locality of which the police had not suspected. Of course I might have presented this side of the affair to a policeman and claimed his company, but a streak of obstinacy made me decide to carry the thing through on my own account. On myself lay the responsibility for the murder in No. "23"; on myself should lie the honour of bringing the murderer to justice.

I hastened my steps, for it was getting much darker and I was fearful lest my quarry should escape me. We had now been walking for nearly an hour and had reached a very squalid part of the city. I was feeling somewhat footsore and wondered, ruefully, whether it was prudence or lack of funds which necessitated the journey being made on foot. The former, I felt assured, for taximen have long memories and many a time

have supplied missing links in a chain of evidence.

At last we turned up a blind alley street, on the left side of which lay a narrow passage. Leaving a good distance between us, for there were no other people in the street with whom I could mingle, I walked quickly after him and watched while he hastened up the passage. Here the dangerous part began. I could not be sure that my shadowing had been unobserved. Were I to turn up that narrow, dingy-looking passage, in the blackness of which no chink of light was visible, who knew whether I should not be attacked with the selfsame knife which had claimed one other victim that evening. Perhaps, just a few steps away he was standing leaning against the wall, awaiting my approach. I could no longer hear his footsteps and my heart beat faster, while beads of sweat gathered on my temples as the doubt of an ambush began to resolve itself into certainty. For a moment I cursed myself for not having secured the reassuring company of a policeman ; the next instant I had overcome my fear and was rejoicing in the adventure which fate had provided. Here was I, who a few hours before had moaned the absence of any excitement, hot in pursuit of a dangerous criminal, possibly within ten yards of his lair. If only I had been armed the darkness of that narrow passage would not have seemed so sinister, but . . . I had two

strong fists and a pair of lungs. If the worst came to the worst I was not prepared to die without a good struggle. Setting my teeth and with my arms stretched out in front of me ready to attack should the occasion arise, I left the street and turned up the passage.

I walked quickly along and breathed a sigh of relief as I came to the end and saw that my fears had only been idle imaginings. I was the only one in the passage and I hung back in the shadows peering out into the unattractive dimness of a stone-flagged court. It formed a square, on three sides of which tall, sordid-looking houses kept guard over who knows what unsavoury secrets, and for a few seconds I felt baffled. The court was empty. I had remained on the other side of the passage too long demurring as to whether to enter. My quarry had vanished, but into which house I had not the slightest idea. Then, suddenly, I heard a slight creak. My heart leapt violently and then I almost laughed. What had startled me was nothing but the gentle rattling of a gate at the head of some stone steps to the basement of the third house to my right. I smiled to myself in the darkness. Someone had passed through that gate a moment before; someone who had been in too great haste to fasten the latch. Moving quietly across the court I approached the house. There was no light in any window, indeed I had seen no light in

any of the houses ; it seemed a court of the dead, sinister and lifeless ; the place appalled me with its air of desolation and I longed for the roar and blaze of Piccadilly. A muffled sound reassured me, however, the unmistakable tones of a human voice. Creeping up to the gate I stared at the basement windows and saw that strong shutters were drawn across them. I had no doubt but that this was the reason why no lights were visible from any of the houses in the court. The occupants had their own reasons for wishing to appear at rest ; lawless reasons which made it necessary to avoid any undue display of illumination in the twilight hours.

I opened the gate softly, tiptoed down the stairs and entered a musty-smelling passage, on one side of which lay a door. Creeping up to it I bent down to the keyhole . . . and nearly cried out with horror at the sight which met my eyes.

It was a fair-sized room into which I gazed, in the centre of which stood a large wooden table, littered with glasses and bottles. Five men, very rough-looking scoundrels, lounged in chairs grouped around it, their eyes fixed on a sixth—the man I had so vigilantly followed, who was now engaged in emptying the contents of a large glass of beer. But it was not these on whom my eyes were riveted ; these I had expected. It was a girl whose presence had filled me with horror ; a girl with faultless features and Titian hair, who

leant back in an easy chair, puffing daintily at a cigarette, her eyes, those unfathomable eyes, staring fixedly at the drinking man. What in Heaven's name was she doing here ? She was not a prisoner—that was apparent from the ease of her attitude. She was here of her own free will. Well then . . . but my mind fought against the intolerable truth—that she, this thing of wondrous beauty—was a crook, the friend of the murderer. The shock was too sudden and unexpected for me to grasp the full sordid significance of the key episode, but this I was soon to learn . . . and from her own lips.

She started to speak and kneeling down beside the door I kept my eye fixed to the key-hole, my ear to the small crack between the door and the wall and was able to catch every word uttered within the room. Eavesdropping is a vice I abhor, and so is killing, but each are equally necessary at certain times. This was most decidedly one of them. Praying that no one would suddenly enter the passage and discover my spying, I remained motionless, wild and terrible conjectures flitting through my brain as I strove to gather up the threads of what I began to realise was something far greater, far more desperate and vicious than the murder of one little fat man in a room numbered twenty-three.

"I THOUGHT he wasn't going to turn up, Jim," the girl was saying. Her voice was strangely fascinating; she spoke with a curious, foreign accent as though English were not her mother tongue, and I found later that this was the case. For the moment, however, it was the words she spoke rather than her accent which claimed my attention and I waited tensely for the other to answer.

The man whom she had called "Jim" threw down the glass and searched in his pocket for a cigar. He lit it and, puffing slowly, gave her an admiring glance.

"Not turn up," he laughed scornfully. "Never known anyone forget a date with you, Greta. D'you mean to say he kept you waiting, the——"

The girl shook her head.

"No. I was there before time, but . . . they're always there hours before."

She smiled cruelly, and like a cold wave the full significance of her words surged over me. She was a decoy; used by this gang to lure their victims to a certain place . . . where they could be dealt with by the man called Jim. My soul felt sick within me; had she been less exquisite, less a creature of unearthly loveliness, my admiration would have turned into revulsion and hatred against

her, but even now, though I knew her for the thing she was, I was unable to despise her. Perhaps, even now, it was not too late; away from her companions she might . . . live up to the promise of that face. But the girl was speaking again and thrusting all other thoughts from my mind I listened with tense eagerness, crouching down as close as I could get to the crack in the door opening.

"Did you put the key back, Jim?"

The man threw her a quizzical glance.

"Always practical. Places her finger on the one fly in the ointment." He smiled. "Well, Greta, my dear, I'm sorry to say I did."

The girl raised her eyebrows and looked the question.

"Why am I sorry?" continued Jim quickly, "because our fingerprints are on that key—and the first thing they'll do is to examine them."

The girl became rigid, her face paled somewhat, but her eyes blazed. She looked, if possible, even more exquisite.

"Then why the devil didn't you think of that before, you boob," she cried scornfully. "You come back and say it was very successful when you've left our signatures behind you. Might just as well have left our cards."

A wave of uneasiness seemed to have infected the others also. They stared at Jim

reproachfully, but no one ventured a comment. I made a mental note that Jim must be their leader—and no gentle one. He seemed to have them well in hand. The girl was the only one to express her opinion of such crass stupidity; the others merely looked it. The atmosphere within the room was distinctly antagonistic to the tall, rather handsome man, who stood facing them all, puffing luxuriously at his cigar, a faint smile playing around his lips.

Suddenly he turned to the girl.

"When you asked me if I'd put the key back, you hoped I had, didn't you?"

She nodded.

"Yes. But I never thought about the fingerprints. I thought it would baffle 'em still more if the key was put back."

The man laughed.

"Well, don't blame me for thinking the same, my dear."

He suddenly slipped one hand into his pocket and withdrew a small object, which he placed upon the table. I longed to know what it was, but my position made this impossible. The expressions on the faces of the little group were sufficiently instructive, however. Astonishment, joy and annoyance had chased each other over the girl's face.

"But—but, why did you swing the lead about leaving it, Jim! What d'you want to frighten us like that for?"

Her voice sounded aggressive, and the men muttered their agreement.

"Sorry. Couldn't resist. And it was true. I *did* put the key back. Completely forgot about the fingerprints. They say every crook makes a big mistake some day, and, by gosh, I thought I had too. I got halfway here when I thought of it, rushed back, hoping I'd get there in time to take it before they'd discovered about the croak and removed it."

The girl's eyes shone.

"D'you mean to say you went back after you'd got away just to get that key? Well, I call that damn' fine of you, Jim."

The men were equally admiring, and I had to admit that I thought so too. That was the reason he was still in the hotel when I had returned from dressing for dinner. I thought it strange at the time that he should emerge from a telephone booth. Obviously he must have gone there after removing the key, in order not to awaken suspicion by walking straight out of the hotel. A man must have a nerve of steel to re-enter an hotel, in one room of which lies a man he has murdered, walk up to the reception desk and remove a key; ignorant all the while as to whether his crime has been discovered and the police are in hiding to secure his arrest. Yet this was what the man before me had done, and, in spite of myself, I felt an unwilling admiration. This

was a big man, a leader of men. What evil chance had led him to waste his energies commanding a gang of crooks? He spoke like a gentleman, he was a gentleman. Then I saw him cast a strange glance at the girl. There was a curious yearning and pathos in it which gave me a clue to the question. Could it be that he, like myself, had fallen a victim to this girl's fascination? Had he become a crook for her sake?

But there was no time to debate this point now. One of the five men, a thin, cadaverous, unpleasant-looking individual, was speaking, and his first words gripped my attention.

"Now that Ginger Pete's gone west"—he spoke in low, grating tones—"who's going to be the next of that little crew?"

Jim frowned and looked with displeasure at the speaker. He stared at him fixedly for a few seconds, while the others waited in a silence which became oppressive. At last the big man spoke.

"Since when," he said icily, "has it occurred to you to question my plans?" His voice became savage. "See here," he hit his fist loudly on the table, making the glasses jump in noisy alarm, "*I'm* leader of this little run-about. Get me? *I* put the questions, not you. Don't forget it."

The other man wilted beneath his fierce gaze and made hasty apology.

"Sorry, Jim," he muttered ingratiatingly.

"Didn't mean no 'arm. Only wanted to know what we're going to do next."

Jim seemed appeased. I had a shrewd notion that his anger had been simulated, perhaps in order to assert his power, perhaps to prove it to the girl. Now he spoke quite calmly, and the girl, flinging away her cigarette, sat upright to listen.

"What we're going to do next?" Jim smiled somewhat grimly. "Well, I guess, it's not us who's got to worry about the future. Seems to me Ginger Pete's crew are going to weather heavy seas without their skipper. Unless the new man's any good."

The girl spoke sharply.

"New man? Who's the guy, Jim?"

"Fellow called Foster. Been with them for a while. Never seen him myself. Anyone here know what he's like?"

He glanced round at the sullen faces. The five men were unanimous. No one had seen him. Apparently this was the first time they had heard of his existence.

"If he's any good, I shouldn't think he'd stick with that bunch," remarked one, a surly-faced youth with a receding chin.

"Well, they've managed to give us a good bit of trouble," put in the girl quickly. "They messed up our chances of getting the Burrow's Bank haul."

"Walked off with those Collier jewels after we'd been to all the trouble of getting the old man to bring them along for Greta. Old

Pete seemed to get wind of everything." It was the thin-faced individual who spoke.

" Precisely." Jim had seated himself and now leant back in his chair, finger-tips together, puffing thoughtfully at his cigar. " And that's why I got rid of him. But for the time being we'll wait and see how the new-comer develops. If he steps into Pete's shoes . . . well . . ." He waved his hand significantly.

The girl smiled and gave him an admiring glance, then, smothering a yawn, she murmured: " What about some sleep? I'm feeling damn' tired."

On the instant I had my cue. Rising noiselessly to my feet, I tiptoed back along the passage to the stone steps. Then, without making the slightest effort to be silent, I sped back up the passage to the door, thrust it open and shut it carefully behind me.

" Good evening, gentlemen," I said, in as cool a voice as I could muster, then bowing to the girl—who, with the rest of the gang, had jumped up at my entrance—" Good evening, madam."

BIRDS OF EVIL FEATHER CHAPTER III

Had I not been in perhaps the tightest corner it has ever been my lot to occupy, the expressions on those seven faces would have caused me to shriek with laughter.

Never have I seen men so startled. My mode of entry was so totally unexpected as to appear supernatural. Had Lucifer himself opened the door it could not have caused them greater alarm. I found out afterwards that Jim and the girl had both believed the murder was discovered and they were doomed . . . that I had a number of men outside to help me round up the gang. They glared at me dumbly for several moments, then Jim, slipping his hand into his pocket, where, I felt certain, it clutched an automatic, rapped out stonily :

" Who the devil are you ? "

I laughed, hoping it didn't sound as forced in their ears as it did in my own, and walked slowly up to the girl.

" Perhaps madam would be kind enough to give me a light. I have no matches."

As I spoke I slipped my hand in my pocket and removed a cigarette-case, laughing scornfully as I saw Jim's hand fly from his pocket gripping a dangerous-looking automatic.

" No, no, gentlemen," I cried quickly. " Don't be alarmed. I am unarmed."

The girl's lips twitched, and for a moment I thought she was going to smile. To my surprise, she handed me a box of matches and they all waited in silence while I lit my cigarette. The five men stared at me with ugly, unfriendly glances, but I could have sworn that in Jim's eyes there was a sort of unwilling admiration. I had made

a good move. As I had guessed, boldness and daring would go a long way with a man of his temperament. If I could win him over, the rest would lie with the girl. The other men, I felt certain, were ciphers and would readily fall in with their leader's wishes.

"Er . . . must we stand?"

I looked round at them all with mock dismay, and with muttered growls the company sank back into their chairs once more, but I noticed that, at a nod from Jim, the cadaverous-faced man had slipped to the door and locked it. Well, I had burnt my boats behind me now. It was up to me to set about building a bridge of lies. Pulling one of the chairs up to the table, I sat down.

"I assume," Jim was speaking slowly, the automatic still clenched tightly in his hand, "that you have not disturbed our little party in order to crave a light off the lady here?"

His voice was like steel, menacing in spite of its suavity.

"Well, no," I laughed as lightly as possible. "That was *one* reason . . . but there was another."

"Indeed. Perhaps you will be good enough to let us know who you are and why you are honouring us with your unexpected company."

I was silent for a moment, then I said, very slowly:

"My name is Foster."

For a moment there was silence. No one moved. My reply was a thunderbolt. Obviously, whoever they had imagined I might be, it certainly was not the new member of the opposing gang. The leader's lips tightened. He seemed curiously relieved, however, and I sensed that he had believed me to be a representative of the law. Now that I also was a self-confessed law-breaker he no longer feared me. For which, as it happened, I was extremely relieved. It is not comfortable to be seated opposite a man whose fingers are playing rather uneasily with the trigger of an automatic. As soon as I had mentioned my name, he returned the pistol to his pocket.

"Your name is Foster," he said slowly. "Then, perhaps, Mr. Foster, you will explain why you have favoured us with this call."

"You have heard of me?"

I put the question carefully, hoping he might give me a clue as to what information he had secured regarding Foster's movements. But he was far too shrewd.

"Why should I have?"

He raised his eyebrows ironically.

"Because . . . well, because I've heard about you . . . from Ginger Pete."

I said the dead man's name slowly, but neither he nor the girl flickered an eyelash. Here was magnificent self-control.

"And who," went on Jim slowly, "is Ginger Pete?"

For a moment I was floored. The man had no intention of giving way an inch. It was up to me to clear matters up.

"Ginger Pete," I said quietly, "is the leader of a certain gang, who, I understand, have had stormy passages with—er—with the present company at various times. Last month I was invited to join forces with them. I did so, but, considering my talents were wasted there, I've come to offer them to you. I may say I've a great admiration for your business methods."

"Indeed?"

A faint smile flickered round the corners of Jim's lips. There was a curious expression in his eyes, an expression which completely baffled me. He said nothing, however, but waited for me to proceed.

"So I came along to-night to offer my services."

I waited for him to reply.

"And what made you think I might accept them?" he said at last, darting me a searching glance.

"Because you're too good a man yourself to miss a good man," I answered lightly.

"H'm." His lips twisted into a rather quizzical smile. "And how did you know I would be here?"

This was the question I had been dreading.

"Because," I retorted boldly, "one of the men in Pete's gang told me of this room. He traced you here one day."

"Oh, did he?"

He was silent a moment. When at last he spoke his voice was full of irony.

"Well, Mr. Foster," he said slowly, "I'm sure we feel very honoured at being selected by you as worthy of your talents. You must pardon me, however, if I don't appear too enthusiastic. You see"—he was smiling rather strangely—"we don't happen to know what your talents are!"

"Admitted," I said quickly, "but I'm quite willing to carry out any little test—shall we call it?—which will display them."

He sat back suddenly. I could see that my answer had surprised him. The girl and the other men all nodded their approval.

"What d'you mean? What sort of test?"

"Anything you like to propose," I went on recklessly. I could see he was wavering, and I hastened to press my advantage. "If the lady here would like any particular piece of jewellery, she has only to name it. She shall wear it this time to-morrow."

The girl laughed satirically and cried:

"Tell him to get the Corboni opals, Jim. God knows, I've been wanting those for long enough."

But Jim was silent. I became aware that he was staring at me fixedly. Two cold blue eyes seemed to be boring into my brain. I set my teeth, determining to bear the scrutiny as best I could. In a few

moments he relaxed, smiled genially, and held out his hand.

"I don't think that will be necessary, Mr. Foster. I can see you're in earnest, and I shan't exact any but the ordinary formalities which everyone must undergo before he becomes a member of my gang. Are you willing?"

I was so glad to be relieved from his cross-examination, to be regarded as a potential member of his gang, that I agreed willingly to undergo any formality he might impose.

"Stevens," he called to one of the others. "Blindfold him."

For a moment I was startled. This was an unlooked-for handicap. To be unarmed was bad enough. . . . Anyway, there was no drawing back now, even had I willed it, so I steeled myself to appear indifferent as the youth with the receding chin quickly produced a thick black scarf and proceeded to tie it carefully over my eyes. There was silence for a few seconds, then I heard a strange sound, as though something were being pulled open.

"You are to take one step forward."

It was Jim speaking and in his voice was a glint of cruelty. On the instant I knew that I stood in mortal danger; that this was no initiation test I was being ordered to perform. Obviously I had failed to satisfy his doubts of me. I hesitated one second,

but one only. Setting my teeth, I stepped forward . . . and fell, down . . . down . . . into icy water. I heard a cruel laugh and then found myself struggling and gasping in an effort to reach the surface.

I tore the scarf from my eyes and, floating on my back, stared in horror at the place into which I had been thrust. It appeared to be some sort of well, probably a submerged cellar to the house used as the gang's head-quarters. They must have opened a trap-door in the floor of the room and thrown me down. For a while I swam round and round, pondering the situation. I searched all the walls, but could find no means of escape, and for some time I floated on my back and cursed my folly in coming alone and unarmed to such a den of crooks.

The water was intensely cold. Suddenly I coughed and some of the water entered my mouth. I almost yelled with delight. It had tasted fresh. This was no dank, musty well-water into which I had been flung; it was fresh from the river. Somewhere, could I but find it, there must be an outlet, an open door through which I might swim into the river. With renewed hope, I examined the walls. They were unbroken, but I was not discouraged. What more likely than that the outlet was in the lower part of this cellar place. I determined to swim round the bottom and investigate. Taking a deep breath, I dived underneath

and swam quickly round, touching the sides with my hands. I found nothing, however, and had to rise once more to the surface and rest awhile. Again I dived down and felt round the other side. This time my efforts were rewarded. I came up for breath, and then decided to take my only chance. A deep breath—down again . . . into the tunnel . . . an agonising desire to breathe, which I just withstood . . . and then up . . . up . . . the river !

I struck out for the bank, clambered to a foothold, and lay back to rest. It had all happened so quickly, and I felt stunned. After a second or two, however, I began to feel better. I looked about me : the house was situated on the banks of the river, had probably been chosen as the gang's head-quarters on that account, and this tunnel that I had made use of was a secret means of escape in case of emergency.

The night air was cool and refreshing, but the clammy touch of the water made me shiver. Feeling rested once more, I determined to let further adventures alone for the remainder of that evening. All I longed for was bed and sleep.

A few minutes later I climbed wearily up the bank, cast one glance at the grim house from which I had escaped . . . and sped rapidly towards home. I was fortunate . . . there was nobody about to notice my sodden appearance, and an importuning taxi passed

me, out on its night prowl. I got in quickly and was driven back to the hotel.

It was now very late: the place was deserted. The clerk, slumbering in the reception office, failed to notice my noiseless entry.

BIRDS OF EVIL FEATHER CHAPTER IV

It was striking nine the next evening when I walked softly along the narrow passage leading into the square stone court. As on the previous evening, it was empty. No chink of light was visible from any of the houses. I tiptoed up to the third house on my right, opened the gate leading down to the basement and moved swiftly down the steps. The passage was in darkness, and, with my heart beating rather faster than usual, I walked slowly down it until I came to the door which had proved so useful the night before.

I paused a moment before entering, for although this time I was doubly armed, yet it required a certain amount of nerve to thrust my unwelcome presence on that ruthless gang. I bent down to the keyhole and saw that there were six men, besides Jim and the girl, gathered around the table. The man I had not seen before was a little, brown-faced Chink, with cruel lips and the enigmatic, impenetrable eyes of his race.

Rising to my feet, I groped in my pocket a moment and pulled out a handful of jewels. They gleamed with a wondrous radiance in the murky light of the passage, their glitter seeming a living protest against being brought into such unlovely surroundings. I smiled to myself. The task had not been an easy one. Far more difficult than I had anticipated, but . . . Beauty had expressed a wish to be adorned by beauty . . . and the gems lay in my hand. I thrust them back into my pocket.

Slipping an automatic into my right hand, I clutched the handle of the door with my left and was overjoyed to find that it was unlocked. I flung it open and strode into the room, covering them all with my pistol.

If my previous entry had been spectacular, this one was doubly so. To all except one of those gathered in that room it must have seemed as though I had indeed arisen from the dead. They had believed themselves to be seated above the secret well in which my dead body was floating . . . and for a moment, I feel sure, they thought it was my ghost come to torment them. With dropped jaws and no vestige of colour in their faces, they remained motionless, staring at me with petrified horror. I stood quite still, returning their gaze, then walked slowly over to the girl, thrust one hand in my pocket and flung on to the table before her . . . the Corboni opals. Her lips parted

with amazed delight, the colour slowly returned to her cheeks, but she made no movement to pick them up, just sat there staring—a look of stupefied awe gradually dispelling the terror from her eyes.

It was the little Chink who was the first to recover his wits. To him, of course, I was merely a human peril—not a spectral guest, as, although he probably had been informed as to my fate, he naturally could not recognise me. Swift as an arrow he darted to the door, locked it, and, turning round, charged at me with uncanny speed and grappled madly for my revolver. The attack was so sudden as to take me completely by surprise. I crashed to the ground, and we rolled over and over, each fighting desperately for the fire-arm. My adventure of the previous day had left me a little exhausted and I was no match for the tenacious Eastern. Just as things were at their worst I saw a whirl of skirts and heard the girl screaming to the Chink:

"Lay off."

On the instant he dropped his hands, jumped up and turned in astonished bewilderment to the girl. I clambered somewhat painfully to my feet, pulled back a chair and sat down. With trembling fingers I removed my case, lit a cigarette and puffed it slowly. A show of nonchalance was my greatest asset, and, despite much inward misgiving, I think my acting passed for the

real thing. The revolver lay where it had fallen in the struggle—on the floor of the room.

"Who the devil told you to go crazy, Sing?" the girl was saying to the Chink. "Jim's the one to give the croak call."

"The croak call"—the phrase made me turn cold for a second as I thought of the black waters underneath where I was seated. Perhaps a second time I should not be able to escape so easily. My fingers closed tightly over my cigarette. It was of no ordinary brand. Inside lay an article which might prove my salvation should I again fail to please. *I had come doubly armed.* I awaited developments quietly therefore, all my nerves on edge, but outwardly, I believe, giving an appearance of disdainful unconcern.

All this while Jim had sat staring at me dully, as though unable to believe that I was a tangible being. He suddenly leant forward, picked up the necklace, examined it carefully and placed it back on the table. Then, fixing me with a piercing glance, he barked out in a jerky voice:

"How did you escape?"

"I am a good swimmer," I replied quietly.

He nodded his head as though in agreement, then once more in that jerky voice:

"How did you get these?"

He waved his hand towards the necklace.

"I get what I want," I replied softly.

He sat silent a little longer, then, his eyes searching me as though to probe my very soul, he said fiercely :

" Why ? "

For the moment I was nonplussed, at a loss as to what lay behind his question. Did he want to know why I had stolen the jewels, or, and this was very much more probable, why I was so insane as to place myself once more in his power after making my escape. I hesitated for a second, then parried his question with another.

" You mean ? "

" Why are you here ? Are you tired of life ? Why have you stolen the necklace ? Why have you brought it to me ? "

It was like the bursting of a dam. He rapped out these and a dozen other questions like lightning, without waiting for any answer. At last he stopped and glared at me imperiously.

" Merely because I am anxious to join your gang," I answered slowly. " You can see I have got talents. It's up to you to make use of them."

I raised the cigarette to my lips, was just about to smoke it again when . . . I remembered. This was not as other cigarettes. Did I smoke below a tiny blue line my scheme was a failure . . . but could I extinguish it in safety ? I waited anxiously for his reply, holding the cigarette upwards in my hand in order to make it burn more slowly.

There was a dead silence. The girl was the first to break it.

"You'll be a damn' fool if you don't take him, Jim. Can't you see . . . the man's a genius . . . the coolest card I've ever seen . . . and the cleverest. Why, we've been trying to raise those jewels for months. I tell him I want them . . . the next night they're here."

She was looking at me with a sort of reverent admiration. It thrilled me to the depths of my being to know that I had been the means of inspiring such a glance. Seething with excitement, yet maintaining as cool a demeanour as possible, I waited . . . for the verdict. It came at last.

"Well, I don't know, Greta," Jim spoke very slowly, in rather puzzled tones. "You may be right, but it seems too good to me. The man's too damn' clever. Anyway"—he gave me another piercing glance—"if you want to become a member, I guess you can start right away." I gently extinguished my cigarette. "If you were a squealer, you'd have had us all in quod by now. I can't understand why you're so eager to join us though—that's what troubling me."

I cast a meaning glance in the direction of the girl. It was taking a terrible risk, because I was not anxious to awaken his jealousy. I judged, however, that he was too strong and vain a man to fear anyone where she was concerned and, as it proved,

this was the case. For a second he seemed surprised, the next moment he laughed rather jeeringly, but his brow had cleared. He pushed over bottles and a glass well within my reach, and told me to help myself.

Ten minutes later I was beginning to feel at ease. The crooks were lively company. Greta as fascinating as her appearance promised. Jim, now that he was clear as to my motive, complimentary and jovial. I had related my method of gaining possession of the necklace, and it was obvious that they were beginning to think they had secured a valuable recruit. I also related various information about Ginger Pete's gang, information which I had gleaned from many sources, but which they believed I had obtained first-hand. This served to dispel all suspicion, and when we parted for the night—which we did towards one o'clock—it was as a respected member of the gang that I walked out of the room. I had told them that I was staying in a little public house, " The Golden Calf," about a quarter of an hour away, and, perhaps, in order to settle any lingering doubts which he might still entertain as to my veracity, Jim accompanied me there and shook hands warmly on parting.

I ran lightly up the stairs to the room into which I had moved that afternoon. It had been a good evening's work and I was feeling elated. Greta had thanked me very

prettily for the opals, which she had allowed me to fasten round her neck. Altogether I had made quite a favourable impression.

Before going to bed I searched in my pockets and carefully removed a half-smoked cigarette. My room gave on to the river and, leaning out of the window, I flung it far into the night before me. There was a tiny splash. I shut the window and smiled grimly to myself in the darkness. It would have been fatal had that been discovered . . . or the decision delayed too long.

BIRDS OF EVIL FEATHER CHAPTER V

RAIN was falling in a steady drizzle as I walked swiftly in the direction of a certain shop in Soho, where, I knew, I would receive a hearty welcome as the bearer of good tidings. Two days had elapsed since the night of my spectacular enrolment as a member of Jim's gang; two days during which, when I was not occupied with my own affairs, I had managed to learn a considerable amount anent their activities in the near future. It was this knowledge which had caused me to set off on my nocturnal errand. For the last two hours I had listened spellbound while Jim had unfolded to me a clever plan, timed to be carried out on the next evening, whereby

the sum of at least twenty thousand pounds should be transferred from the safe of the Glynton Bank into his own. It was an ingenious scheme and, as far as I could see, had every possibility of success.

Situated in a lonely, deserted part of an outlying suburb, Glynton Bank would seem to present small difficulty to a determined man. Few people passed that way at night. Fields surrounded it and, with the exception of a small vacant house attached to the bank building—presumably intended for the use of the manager—there were no houses within ten minutes' walk. A veritable plum waiting to be picked—or so it had appeared to Jim at first sight. On further investigation, however, he discovered that on account of its precarious position someone was left there on guard every night, while a policeman had been appointed to patrol the road outside and question any suspicious characters. Not quite so easy—but Jim's cunning brain had worked out a novel scheme.

Through a system of string-pulling and, let it be known, not without a certain adequate greasing of palms, he had obtained tenancy of the house attached to the bank, on a three months' lease. That the bank authorities should countenance such a tenancy was astonishing to me, but possibly Jim's faked credentials had fostered the idea that were this house occupied by a trustworthy tenant it would constitute a further protection

to the bank. However, Jim's powers had effected his purpose, and without more ado he had deputed certain members of his gang, the total number of which I had not yet ascertained, to carry out repairs and house decoration. At least, that is what they would appear to be engaged on should any passer-by be interested: there were always one or two men painting the window sashes and doors, while in the cellar a few more were skilfully cutting a passage into the basement of the bank next door. A clever scheme, for were any strange noises heard by the bank employees they would be considered as part of the legitimate work being carried on next door. In the basement of the bank the wall would not give any appearance of being touched, the actual displacement of the bricks being left to the final night, the very next evening, when it was proposed to effect the robbery.

The second part of Jim's plan was equally ingenious. The policeman on guard outside would be likely to hear any strange happenings within the bank, any cries for help on the part of the clerk, therefore it was proposed that there should be no shots fired nor any noises made liable to awaken his distrust. Here the little Chink, Lu Sing, was to prove useful. He was, apparently, an adept in the art of hypnotism, and it was arranged that, after being seized and gagged, the clerk should be hypnotised by

Sing into revealing the password of the safe. After which he should be put to sleep while we carefully emptied the safe and returned back to the house next door, letting ourselves out by the front door, quite openly, and driving off in Jim's car, which would be left waiting outside.

During the past month Jim had made a habit of calling with friends late at night, as though to show them over the house and see how the workmen were progressing. He had taken care to establish a friendly footing with the constable on duty and—as the robbery was timed to take place about half-past eight—there was little fear that the policeman would consider our call other than an ordinary visit of inspection. The whole affair had been very carefully thought out. I was amazed at its perfection.

How to profit thereby was the problem which was occupying my mind as I walked rapidly along, my hat pulled down well over my face, drawing back into the shadows whenever anyone approached. For I was not anxious to be recognised in that unhealthy part of the Metropolis.

At last I arrived at my destination—an unobtrusive little tailor's shop hidden up a side street. Over the door hung the sign "D. RICHENS." I gave a sigh of relief. I was not too late. Evidently I had been expected, and they had not yet dispersed. The sign proved that my friends

were within—had it been removed I should have known I was too late. I stopped casually at the door and lit a cigarette, glancing up and down the street to make sure that I was unobserved. The street was empty, so still screening my match from the wind as though continuing to light my cigarette, I softly hummed the opening bars of a well-known song. Instantly the door was flung open. I entered quickly and walked along a dark passage to a room on my left, knocked twice on the door and walked in.

"Good evening, everyone. Sorry I'm so late."

I was greeted by a chorus of ironic greetings.

The room was rank with the smell of drink and thick with smoke, through which the brutal faces of five men gradually became clear to my eyes, momentarily dazed by the sudden transition into light after the darkness of the passage.

" What happened, Foster ? Did you oversleep ? "

I smiled at the speaker, a dare-devil, little Irishman named O'Hara, and helped myself to a drink before replying. Then, sinking into a chair I started to speak, the eyes of all the company riveted on my face.

As concisely as I could I described the plan arranged by Jim, without, of course, in any way divulging the fact that I had been duly elected a member of his gang. I was asked no questions, however, as to how I had obtained the information. Crooks

do not worry their colleagues unduly with awkward inquiries, and since the death of Ginger Pete, the leadership of this little gang —to which I had been attached for a few weeks—had more or less devolved upon my shoulders. So, when I had finished my account they all remained silent, pondering the matter over and waiting for me to tell them my plans.

"There should be plenty of good stuff in that safe, so I understand. Worth while having. What d'you say? Game to have a try for it?"

"Good God, yes."

The assent was unanimous.

"Good. Well, this is what I propose."

And I made a quick sketch of my plans, to which, I was pleased to see, they all agreed without the slightest demur. I went over them twice so that there should be no hitch, and telling them to be there at the same time to-morrow evening—when I would divide the booty—I took a parting drink and bade them all good night.

As I walked hastily down the drenched streets, I laughed outright at the thought of my success. Self-elected leader of one of London's most powerful gangs, member of another rival band, and, most entrancing of all, close friend of the beautiful Greta. Two days had sufficed to assure me that she was well worth winning. That I had awakened her interest I was certain. . . . I whistled gaily as I walked briskly home.

We had been driving for nearly an hour, and I was becoming nervous. Had I miscalculated the time in any way? I had believed it would only take us forty minutes to reach Glynton village, and had based my plans accordingly. Was it much farther? I felt sick with apprehension as I thought of the consequences if it should be. All my arrangements upset, my schemes foiled; it would be the most infernal luck. I bit my lips in my agitation, and steeled myself to appear quite calm and unconcerned, having a shrewd idea that, out of the corner of his eye, Jim was regarding me curiously, perhaps anxious to see how I behaved on the eve of action. I smiled grimly as I wondered what his thoughts would be could he but catch an inkling of my own!

Suddenly we turned up a street leading under a railway arch. Towards the top it forked, and the little Chink—who was driving—took the road to the right, on either side of which lay small villas with midget gardens. Jim and I were seated in the back of the car, and now he touched my arm.

"This is the street."

I was at once enormously relieved. My anxiety fell from me like a discarded cloak. We would arrive in time! I smiled back at him.

" Good ! "

My bearing evidently impressed him favourably. He looked pleased and added :

" You can see them from here. Those two buildings right at the bottom of the valley."

The road mounted a fairly steep hill. We had left the little villas behind. Fields dotted with buttercups stretched as far as eye could see into the distance, where a sombre blackness broke the horizon . . . the Glynton Bank and its attendant house. A solitary place in which to pass the night. I felt sorry for any clerk forced to mount guard in such loneliness. Then a sudden wave of excitement made my breath come faster. I felt immensely elated. We were on the spot. The fun was about to begin.

As we drew up to the house, a burly constable approached, and nodded his head in reply to Jim's greeting. Lu Sing stopped the car some distance down the road and, after we had alighted, Jim turned to the policeman.

" You might just cast an eye on my bus, constable," he said pleasantly. " I've got some valuable papers in it that I shouldn't like to lose. Not that there are likely to be many passers-by up here "—he added with a grin—" but I'd be immensely obliged if you would."

The policeman touched his cap.

" Certainly, sir. I'll keep watch all right."

He wandered up to the car and leant against the side. Evidently he was taking no chances. And neither was Jim, for by this simple stratagem the policeman was some little distance away from the house and therefore, unlikely to hear any noise, should we be unfortunate enough to make one. I smiled as I caught Jim's eye.

As we approached the house he slipped his hand into his pocket and withdrew a Yale key, pushed open the garden gate and walked rapidly up the path. I followed close on his heels, casting a quick glance at the bank next door. There was a light in the window.

Jim inserted the key, flung open the door and we entered a tiny hall, smelling, not unpleasantly, of new paint.

" This way," he cried.

He switched on the light and pointed towards a staircase leading down to the cellar. We descended it quickly, dispelling the darkness at the bottom with our torches. I looked about me curiously. We were in a low ceilinged cellar, dank and musty. No wholesome smell of clean paint relieved its fustiness. A quantity of bricks were ranged upon one side, while on the other a number of wooden planks supported a piece of dingy-looking canvas. Jim lifted away the planks, removed the canvas and revealed a large hollow cut out in the wall. He flashed his

torch over it, and I could see that the remaining bricks had been skilfully picked out so that they could be removed with little difficulty or noise.

"Perfect," I murmured softly.

"Better let Sing finish the job," Jim whispered back. "He's sure to be quieter than us."

I nodded and in dead silence, with ears strained for any sound which might warn us that our tunnelling had been overheard, we watched the little Chink carefully displace the bricks and place them gently on the ground beside him. He worked with uncanny speed and noiselessness, and in a little while we were able to flash our torches through into the basement of the bank.

It was a large room, filled with heavy strong boxes, and when, in a few minutes, the opening was large enough to allow us to clamber through, I saw that the hole in the wall had been made with such care that only a few tiny pieces of plaster had fallen to the ground on this side. There was little fear that the burrowing had been suspected.

"Get the handcuffs ready," whispered Jim in my ear.

I nodded, and with my nerves keyed up to fever pitch tiptoed after him up some stone steps leading to the ground floor, the little Chink close on my heels. The hall was lit by a flickering jet of gas, and by its light I saw the door of the room in which,

unsuspecting and alone, sat our prospective victim. Jim bent down to the key-hole and peeped into the room. He rose quietly and motioned me to do likewise. I did so, and saw that luck had deserted the unfortunate bank clerk. He was seated with his back towards the door, and would present little difficulty to overcome.

Jim now slipped one hand in his pocket and produced three masks, which we quickly donned. Then, very slowly and stealthily, Sing opened the door. He was holding a vicious-looking gag in one hand, the purpose of which was only too clear. The success of Jim's scheme lay entirely in the fact that no sound should be heard, also that the bank clerk should be conscious. With the litheness of a cat the little Chinaman slipped through the door and up to the bent figure writing at a desk. A second later the gag was firmly adjusted and . . . not a sound had been made. This was my cue. I rushed in and fastened handcuffs over the man's fists, while Jim produced a thick rope and tied him carefully to the chair. Two anguished eyes stared panic-stricken into my own, but bound and helpless, the clerk was unable to offer any resistance.

Jim walked over to the safe which stood in a corner of the room. He bent down and examined it, then turned to me.

"As I thought—it's worked by a key-word."

He took a piece of paper and a pen which lay on the desk, then leaning over the powerless man, he spoke very softly and distinctly.

"You're not going to be hurt, if you're wise. We want to know the key-word to that safe. Write it down for us, and you won't be touched. Otherwise——" His pause was significant.

The clerk stared blindly at him for a moment, then slowly bent his head as though in agreement.

Jim's eyes gleamed. It was going to be easier than he had anticipated. Lu Sing's occult powers would not be necessary. I unlocked one of the handcuffs, and placed the pen and paper within the man's reach. For some time the little clerk appeared to be deliberating. He started to write, broke the nib of his pen, and had to wait until another was handed to him. At last he wrote, very slowly, the word "FARM-HOUSE." Jim glanced at it and moved quickly over to the safe, with the eyes of the clerk fixed on him as though in torment. For a few minutes Jim worked at the mechanism . . . but with no result. He spelt out the word three times . . . but the lock still refused to open. Then, rising swiftly to his feet, he motioned to Sing.

"False key-word. Out to waste time, I suppose. Get to work, Sing."

The little clerk had proved faithful. Perhaps he hoped that at any moment the

constable outside would fly to his rescue. It was a rather fine attempt to protect the bank's property, but it would avail him nothing. We had come prepared for every eventuality.

Lu Sing walked close up to the seated man, who glared at him defiantly as though willing him to do his worst. Evidently he thought his last hour had come. A gallant little fellow—I could not help admiring him. But it was the Chinaman who now drew my attention. A subtle change had transformed his face. He looked evil, devilish. The stony impenetrable mask was removed, and his eyes, two living fires, gleamed with a mad light. Stretching his arms out before him he stared inflexibly at the bound man, making uncanny passes with yellow, claw-like hands above his head. The tension was terrible. For a while the clerk fought wildly to retain his will, but the Chink was too strong for him. In a few moments he seemed to sink back in his chair; his eyes looked leaden and dull. Lu Sing gently released the gag, then murmured softly in a husky unnatural voice, full of an imperious command:

"*What — is — the — key-word — to — the — safe?*"

"*Royalty.*"

The reply came in a queer strained voice.

On the instant Jim moved over to the safe and started to spell the word out. I

watched a moment longer, however, while the Chink made a few more passes over the clerk's head. Instantly the eyes of the bound man flickered, then shut and, had it not been for a certain strained look on his face I should have believed him to be sleeping naturally. The sight had fascinated me, but now I turned my attention to Jim who had reached letter "T." I watched, breathlessly, while he worked the "Y." Was it the right key-word? For a moment I thought Sing had failed, but the next instant, slowly and silently the great safe door swung open. The East had conquered the West: I knelt down beside Jim and together we removed the contents, handing out bulky packets of gold and valuables to the Chink, who thrust them into a large black bag.

A few moments later we tiptoed from the room, down the stone steps and into the basement. My two companions were looking relieved and satisfied. The critical part of the business was over . . . at least, so they thought, but it was here my difficulties began. My heart was beating rather uncomfortably, my nerves taut and over-strung. I was so desperately anxious that everything should go right, that my plans should succeed. Any hitch now would be fatal.

We clambered through the hole into the cellar again, and softly ascended the stairs, the black bag containing our spoils gripped

firmly in Jim's right hand. As we emerged into the darkness of the hall, however, Jim had his first intimation that everything was not going according to plan . . . at least not *his* plan! The electric light which he had left burning had been extinguished.

"What the devil——" he cried fiercely, but the remainder of his sentence was lost for ever.

On the instant several dark shapes sprang at us. I immediately pressed a tiny spring in my pocket, and a midget, rose-coloured electric light shone in my button-hole. It was too dark to recognise features, and I had arranged this identity signal beforehand. I was running no risks of falling a victim to my own followers! Jim and the little Chink were fighting madly, but . . . with no chance of success. The odds were against them. They were three to one. But I did not pause to watch the contest. The instant the attack started, I snatched the bag from Jim's hand and rushed to the door, flung it open and ran madly down the path to the gate. No one stopped me—why should they? Each believed I was saving the booty for them! I fled up the road to the car, near which we had left the stalwart policeman. He was no longer there, however, but I didn't wait to wonder what his fate had been. My heart was beating with a mad exultation. I had succeeded! Another car stood opposite the house, a dilapidated looking

Austin in which, I knew, my friends, had arrived. Releasing the brakes of Jim's car, I started her off and drove rapidly towards London, my speedometer jumping higher every second. I laughed aloud in my excitement. My brain whirled. Riches and the most beautiful girl in the world . . . my two objectives, were rapidly coming within my reach.

I grinned with delight.

* * * * *

My head was aching painfully ; a curiously unpleasant taste was in my mouth ; my lips felt dry and parched. Every bone in my body seemed to be bruised, if not broken, and I was *tired* . . . terribly, incredibly tired.

" Give him another dose."

Someone was speaking above my head. I opened my eyes dazedly and looked around.

I was in my own room at " The Golden Calf " with the morning sunlight streaming in at the window. A tall man was leaning over me, another stood at his side. For a few seconds I was unable to grasp what had happened. Then suddenly . . . I remembered . . . and groaned aloud. The man at the side of the bed came forward and I saw it was Jim.

" Feeling better ? " he asked.

The other man, who I now realised must be the doctor, handed me a glass filled with brandy. I drank it gratefully and lay back again feeling a little refreshed.

I smiled at Jim.

"Got a head like a steam engine," I murmured. "What's happened? I can't remember it all yet."

"You had an accident," Jim answered quickly.

He signalled to me that the doctor was present and I nodded, closing my eyes again.

"You'll be all right now." It was the doctor speaking. "The effects of chloroform always leave one dazed for a bit. Stay in bed all day and I'll call again this evening."

I muttered some acknowledgment and, through half-shut eyes, watched him open the door gently and depart. Jim heaved a sigh of relief.

"Good. Now we can talk."

He seated himself on the bed and stared curiously at me.

"Well . . . can you remember anything yet?"

The word "chloroform" had explained everything about which I was still puzzled. I nodded painfully.

"Tell me your part of it first," I said.

"God knows what happened," he growled. "Everything was going splendidly. You remember we got the goods and came up into the hall. Then some devils sprang at us, the late lamented Pete's gang, of course. How they got wind of the affair is what I want to know."

He gave me a searching glance, ugly and threatening. For a moment I felt uneasy.

I sat up and stared at him as boldly as I could.

"Who the hell d'you think squeaked, Jim?" I asked quickly.

He glared at me again.

"To be frank, Foster, I thought it was *YOU*."

There was an evil look in his eyes.

I jumped up as though in fury.

"The devil you did!" I cried, then sank back groaning. My head was still abominably painful.

"Don't get crabby," he went on more calmly. "You belonged there once, and anyhow I don't think so now. The condition you were in when I found you was a sight too realistic to be faked." He smiled sardonically and I felt reassured.

I thanked my lucky stars I had insisted on that smash-up. It *was* realistic! My head gave aching proof of that!

"But what I want to know," he went on quietly, and there was a steely glint in his voice, "is where you were going in that car when you got smashed up—also what happened to the swag."

I jumped up quickly again and gave what, I hoped, was a perfect imitation of surprise and anger.

"Good God," I cried furiously, "what on earth are you driving at? D'you think I'm

a twister? What d'you mean? 'Where was I going?' 'What happened to the swag?' Where the hell do you think I was going? God, I did my best to get the stuff out safely, got smashed up doing it and you come along with your damned suspicions, you . . . "

I treated him to a number of unpleasant epithets, which I considered he merited, and in highly coloured language and aggrieved tones explained exactly what I thought of him. My fury seemed to dispel his doubts, however. He listened unmoved for a while and then broke in.

" All right, Foster. I apologise. Shake."

He proffered his hand which, after a display of hesitation, I condescended to shake.

" Now let's hear the tale," he said quietly.

It was a pity my head was aching so painfully. It made it very difficult to think—and I must make no mistake. This was, perhaps, the trickiest part of the whole affair. I took another sip of brandy and lay back gazing at the ceiling, thus escaping the eagle scrutiny of his vigilant eyes.

" There's nothing much to it," I began. " I was following you along the passage when the fun started. I recognised one of them and knew it wasn't the police, so I thought if I could get off with the goods everything would be all right. The gang wouldn't go on fighting when there wasn't anything left to fight for—and I knew you'd make your get-away all right."

" I did," put in Jim grimly, " and in *their* car."

I smiled and continued quickly.

" I snatched the bag from you, rushed to the door and reached the car, started it up and drove off. It never occurred to me to wonder if it was empty. Well, I got about half-way to London and was going down a quiet lane—where you found me, I suppose ? "

I stopped and looked at Jim questioningly. He nodded his head.

" Searched for you all night, after I got back and found you hadn't ! Thought you'd run off with the stuff, and I can tell you if you had you'd have had a worse smash-up still." He laughed meaningly. " Then I came down Smitham Corner and found my car smashed up and you stretched over the front seat. Thought you were dead, you looked such a mess. Well, what happened ? "

" I don't know," I answered blankly. " One of their lot must have been hidden in the back. I just remember feeling a wet, sticky rag thrust over my face—chloroform, of course—I looked round wildly, had a fleeting glimpse of a burly-looking scoundrel, then I felt something hit me on the head and all went black."

I stole a glance at Jim and saw he was staring at me thoughtfully.

" Someone hidden in the back ! Of course, just what they would think of. Taking no

chances. But why did they smash the car up ? that's what I can't understand."

He knit his brows in bewilderment.

" I suppose it smashed itself up," I answered thoughtfully. " I was going at a good pace when he knocked me down and I expect he couldn't get to the wheel in time."

Jim pursed his lips and nodded.

" It's been a damn costly business," he said bitterly. " Twenty-five quid gone west for the lease of that house, gallons of paint, my car smashed up and all for nothing . . . except a third-rate Austin. Anyway I'm damn glad I've done 'em out of that."

The thought of so much thought and energy being expended in order to secure the dilapidated car of which I had caught a glimpse as I darted into Jim's, made me long to burst into hysterical laughter. I was not yet entire master of my nerves and had to cover my face with both hands in order to conceal my mirth. The action was a lucky one, however. Thinking I must be feeling faint again, Jim rose slowly from the bed and stood beside it motionless for a while. At last, my hysteria overcome, I dropped my hands and looked up at him.

" I think I'll sleep for a bit, Jim, if you don't mind. Head's pretty foul."

Which was perfectly true. It had been bandaged carefully, but its throbbing was torture. I lay back and shut my eyes.

" Right. Have a glance at the paper

when you feel better. It's got an account of both your nocturnal activities."

I heard him place something on the bed, but I didn't move.

" Thanks," I muttered sleepily.

In a few seconds I heard the door close gently. I lay still for a while, then opened my eyes again. I was alone.

I seized the paper eagerly and quickly scanned two paragraphs which lay close together on the third page, against which a tiny pencil mark had been placed.

" SKILFUL BANK ROBBERY " ran one heading. I smiled gleefully as I read a terse account of the method used to enter the bank and the disappearance of the safe's contents. The bank clerk, it appeared, had recovered consciousness, but apparently his statement as to the hypnotism was not believed. I gathered he would lose his job for divulging the key-word. Poor man ! I felt very sorry for him !

The other paragraph was headed " STRANGE ACCIDENT ON LONELY ROAD." It went on to describe how my unconscious body had been picked up by a passing Samaritan and taken immediately to the nearest doctor. I was glad to see that no connection had been made between the two events. I had been some considerable distance from the bank when the smash had happened. The paragraph stated that I

appeared to have been chloroformed, but gave no further details.

I put the paper down and lay for a long while thinking, a wild relief filling my body. I had succeeded ! Foiled two powerful gangs of crooks, seized their spoils—twenty thousand of the best—and in spite of all remained unsuspected by either lot. It was delightful. Jim's doubts, I knew, had been completely satisfied—my physical injuries had had much to do with that. With my other friends I did not anticipate much difficulty. They would read of my accident in the paper and draw their own conclusions. I was immensely pleased that they had no idea as to where I lived. It would have been awkward —even for my fertile tongue—had Jim met one of them coming up to see me !

I shut my eyes once more and in a few moments was fast asleep.

BIRDS OF EVIL FEATHER CHAPTER VII

A week had passed since the night of my accident , a week during which the wound in my head had slowly healed, and I was beginning to feel quite fit again. All this time I had not been idle. As soon as I felt able to I paid a flying visit to the little tailor's shop in Soho and, although my welcome had not been dazzling, there was no

suggestion of my being a twister. They thought I had bungled—and badly—but agreed I had had bad luck. As I expected, they believed it was a member of Jim's gang who had lain hidden in the car and put me out.

It may appear strange that my friends were not more suspicious, in view of the fact that I had been Jim's accomplice on the job. But the reason was simple. We were all masked as I had stated—as part of my plans—that I intended to secrete myself in the house early on the night of the robbery, attack one of Jim's party without the others seeing, remove his mask and take his place. It had amazed me that they should consider such a scheme feasible . . . and I had felt very flattered that they held so high an opinion of my powers! My reason for choosing Jim's car in which to escape presented some slight difficulty, but I told them I thought—as it was obviously the higher-powered machine, since Jim ran a Daimler, that I would have a better chance of getting clear away by so doing. I also said I had left the Austin for them. This appeared to satisfy them entirely, but they were all agreed that I had made a bad slip there, for had I gone in the Austin they, not unnaturally, assumed that I should not have had any accident—and their share of the booty would not have been lost. An entirely incorrect assumption, as it happened, but I thought it unwise to enlighten them on this point!

I had also paid several visits to the basement room where Greta—more beautiful than ever—smiled on me kindly and insisted on bandaging my wounds. It was evident that she had no suspicions about me whatsoever. The interest I had awakened in her on that unforgettable night when I had brought the opals, had steadily increased and, although I was only too delighted, Jim's behaviour had begun to trouble me. When I gave him the impression that I was anxious to join his gang in order to be near Greta he had treated the matter as a joke. Now, however, I caught him casting strange, uncertain glances at both of us . . . and for my own part I was none too happy. A flirtation with a delightful girl is one thing; a knife in the back from a jealous man another. And Greta seemed to have thrown discretion to the winds. She treated him scornfully, as though exulting in her power to hurt, then she would turn to me and be . . . well, more than ordinarily charming. I could see that he was getting daily more irritated and I resolved to hurry matters up as much as I could. Fortunately my opportunity soon came.

I have said that a week had passed since my accident and that I had not been idle. Jim had initiated me into the future arrangements of the gang, detailed their numbers and ramifications, and I was amazed at the extent of his confraternity. He appeared to

rule not one band but several, all with their own sub-leaders, Jim's being the master-mind behind their activities. This was a strong man, a Napoleon of crookdom. At the moment he had what he described as a brilliant scheme on foot, whereby he hoped to be recompensed for the loss of his twenty thousand. So far he had given us no clue as to the details but proposed to do so that night.

It was with a brisk step that I sped towards the basement room in the early hours. I was feeling immensely elated as, should the fates be propitious, it seemed to me I would soon be able to break my connection with him. And indeed, I was feeling that a little holiday abroad would be exceptionally inviting, particularly so if I could compel a certain girl to accompany me. I whistled gaily as I walked along, but quickly stopped, as I realised that it was unwise to draw attention to my movements at such an hour. Arrived at my destination I rapped twice on the door and entered.

Six of the gang were there, including Jim and Greta—who smiled at me in welcome. They were all seated round the table, apparently awaiting my arrival before Jim propounded his plan. I greeted them cordially, helped myself to a drink and sat down, prepared to listen attentively to whatever the great man proposed.

Without any preliminary he started.

" Ever heard of ' La Belle Masque ' ? "

There was a murmur of rather scornful assent. One would have had to live in a desert island and be blind and deaf as well, in order to escape the thousand and one articles written daily in praise of this most fascinating dancer. Six months ago she had taken London by storm, ever since then she had become its toast. Every magazine included her photograph, the beauty specialists vied with each other to secure her patronage of their cosmetics. Was she beautiful or not ? That was the question which had occupied thousands of pages and as many hearts. For the exquisite dancer was always masked. It was whispered that no man had seen her face. Provocative eyes peeping through a silky veil smiled archly from every photograph. Her mask had become a legend like the sword of Arthur, the beauty of Helen. She had achieved a news interest only equalled by that of the Royal Family—and it was of this star that Jim inquired whether we had heard. Our comments became ironic and he hastened to add :

" Good. Thought perhaps you had," his tone was bantering but became serious as he continued : " And Prince Ali Ben Sura ? Not quite so important, but d'you know anything about him ? "

We nodded. Although he had only been in England for three months this young Indian Prince had already managed to make a rather spectacular name for himself in

London. In addition to the fine features and brilliant eyes of his race he possessed a magnificent physique. His manners were perfect; his accomplishments legion . . . and his purse apparently unfathomable. Indeed he seemed to have money enough to burn and—his tastes lying in the direction of the stage—beauties enough on whom to squander it. Although he favoured European clothes and was always attired in Savile Row perfection, he still retained—perhaps because of its distinction, perhaps through some religious belief—a green silk turban in the centre of which shone an emerald whose value was said to be fabulous. An exotic personality! It was hardly likely that such a Bird of Paradise would pass unnoticed in London. We all nodded and waited for Jim to proceed.

"Well, perhaps this is something you don't know." Jim bent forward and spoke in a graver tone. "For the last month Ben Sura has been madly in love with . . . La Belle Masque. He haunts her performances, dogs her footsteps and . . . she has refused to so much as glance at him. Every present he sends her she returns. All of which, of course, has increased the young man's ardour. Probably why she does it! Anyway this is where *we* step in. To-morrow morning the Prince will receive a letter purporting to come from the dancer. That letter Greta will write at my dictation. The Prince has never seen the dancer's writing—no one has,

she never writes. The Prince has never seen the dancer's face—no one has, she never unveils. *Ergo!*"

He paused and looked round triumphantly at our baffled faces. I had a glimmering idea of his scheme but no clear vision. We waited tensely for him to proceed. No one spoke or moved a muscle. I could see that Greta, also, was equally perplexed.

"The letter will inform the Prince that La Belle Masque has relented. To his delight he will discover she wants to sup with him at the Berkeley that evening. He is to come along and keep the appointment entirely secret. The Prince will turn up all right . . . small fear of him refusing . . . and so will the girl."

We all looked our surprise.

"*Only* she will be Greta, *not* the dancer . . . and I don't think the Prince will lose much by the exchange."

Jim smiled, casting an admiring glance at the girl. She was leaning forward staring at him earnestly, and as the full significance of his scheme began to dawn on her the colour gradually drained from her cheeks until she was ashen.

"Good God, Jim," she burst out at last. "What on earth d'you mean? He's *bound* to find out. I'm not doing anything like that, thank you."

"Oh, yes, you are, my dear." He smiled at her pleasantly. "You'll do exactly what

I say. And you ought to be jolly thankful too. It's not every day of the week that you get an opportunity of supping with a prince—and such a fascinating one too, by all accounts."

"But what's it all for?" I broke in quickly.

"To get the emerald." He almost hissed the words. "And there's not the slightest chance of the Prince finding out he's been made a fool of—at least not until La Belle Masque herself tells him. He's never seen her face, and Greta's beautiful enough to satisfy any expectations he may have had. He's not going to be disappointed. Greta's exactly the same build as the dancer and I'm going to supply her with exactly the same mask and a yellow wig. Where's the snag in it?"

He looked round at us in triumph.

"Only . . . granting all that, how's Greta going to get hold of the emerald?" I ventured, while the others muttered agreement.

"Ask for it," he answered promptly, "tactfully, of course."

"And if he refuses to give it? It may be an heirloom or something with which he can't part."

It was the little Chink who spoke.

"Then take it—with or without violence. What does it matter? I've got a man who's arranged to pay me fifty thousand for that emerald, spot cash, to-morrow night . . . and he's going to get it."

We all gasped. Fifty thousand! No wonder Jim was so determined about it. A look of evil greed shone on the faces of the five men, on my own as well, I do not doubt, but Greta still looked troubled. I could see that this was the biggest thing she had yet attempted and the standing of Ben Sura intimidated her. But Jim was speaking once more and we all waited, breathlessly, for further details.

"Greta's got nothing to fear," he went on slowly. "I shall be waiting in the room next to the one in which she will arrange to meet the Prince. It can easily be arranged. La Belle Masque will ring up the Berkeley and engage a private room. I shall also ring up and engage the one next to it. If Greta succeeds in inducing Ben Sura to hand her the emerald as a gift she's got to wander towards the window in her room and sing a few bars of a song. Both windows will be open and I shall hear and know everything's O.K. Greta will then say good-bye to the Prince and promise to be there again the next evening. If she *doesn't* succeed . . . if the Prince doesn't seem too keen to give up the jewel, well, this little toy will come in useful."

He thrust his hand into a pocket and withdrew a tiny silver mounted dagger, set in an ivory sheath. He pulled it out and the blade glittered in the gaslight with evil menace.

"Toledo steel," he explained, replacing it carefully within the sheath. "Deadly sharp. A dab of poison on the tip and the Prince won't be much trouble."

We all drew a deep breath. The scheme was diabolically daring. My heart beat fast. Fifty thousand!

"As I said, if everything goes right Greta is to give us a tune; if it doesn't . . . she sticks him, takes the emerald and goes out, locking the door behind her, then comes in to us. *Tout simple!*"

All this time Greta had made no sound. She sat with elbows on the table, her head propped up by her hands, staring before her, those unfathomable eyes full of a wistful sadness. I longed to put my arm round her and tear her away from such danger and sordidness, but . . . fifty thousand! my lips tightened as I thought of it.

"And what do we do in the affair?" I asked slowly.

Jim gave me a quick glance.

"You'll be in the next room with me," he said quietly. "So will you." He nodded to the youth with the receding chin, who, I had been told, was a marvellous shot. "If by twelve o'clock, nothing happens . . . Greta doesn't sing or come in to us . . . we go into the room ourselves and get to work. The rest of you," he added, turning to the others, "will be scattered about the hotel—I'll tell you all your stations—

to-morrow—in case anything does go wrong and we have to make a bolt for it. You might be useful."

I nodded slowly. It was an extraordinarily clever scheme. I could see no hitch in it, unless Rumour was a lying jade and La Belle Masque's features were not entirely unknown to the Prince. This point, however, did not seem to occur to the others, and I carefully refrained from mentioning it. The chances were small and Greta looked sufficiently scared already. I touched her gently on the shoulder and begged her not to worry. She gave me a watery smile, but continued to gaze fixedly into the distance, as though at some incredible sight. I had not yet learnt her history—I hoped to one day from her own lips—but in spite of her careless life there was at times a curious look of . . . almost spirituality about her, which had indeed first awakened my interest. At this moment she looked as though she were passing in review all the innocent days of her childhood . . . incredulous at their passing. Her expression unnerved me and, after promising to be there the next day—when all further details were to be discussed—I left them, pleading fatigue. As I moved to the door I saw Jim take pen and paper from his pocket and hand them to the girl.

" La Belle Masque's " letter was about to be written.

THE last strokes of six had scarcely finished chiming from a neighbouring church steeple when I let myself cautiously out of the side door of " The Golden Calf." My early rising was not a habit. It was sheer necessity which had driven me to forsake my bed, upon which I had flung myself less than three hours before. The sun had already attained a sufficient height to render the prospect of an early morning walk rather inviting, however, and I set out cheerfully, with visions of a goodly breakfast brightening my soul.

I took a road leading down to the river and walked for a while along the Embankment, rejoicing in the play of light and shadow over the water. In a moment, however, I had reached a taxi rank, clambered into one and told the driver to take me quickly to Hyde Park Corner. He grinned at me jovially, and I wondered, for the moment, whether he believed I was an advocate of early morning bathing in the Serpentine! Leaning back wearily, I lit a cigarette and stared before me unseeingly. Someone has said that no woman, however beautiful, is at her best before breakfast . . . and I was about to put this theory to the proof. But somehow I had small qualms that the little lady with whom I proposed

to share that meal, would fail the test. I smiled to myself. Her dreams would be troubled could she but guess my errand . . . but the smile died away quickly as I remembered its urgency. Was it right to bring this girl into it? For long hours during the night I had wrestled with this question and as a result I now sat in this taxi speeding through London in the early hours of the morning. And yet . . . suppose anything were to go wrong! I felt sick at the thought. But common sense came quickly to the rescue. Nothing could go wrong; nothing should go wrong. I smiled confidently again. Anyway, it was for her to decide. I could but ask; she could but refuse.

We had now reached Hyde Park Corner and I quickly alighted, giving the taximan a good tip for his services. I walked briskly in the direction of a certain hotel, where I was well known, and where I hoped my appearance at such an hour would not cause too much comment!

The reception clerk greeted me cordially and there was an amused twinkle in her eyes when I explained my purpose. I handed her a card on which I had written:

Must breakfast with you immediately.
Very urgent.

and bade her have it taken immediately to Miss Vivienne Strand. Then, sinking into an easy chair, I waited with strained nerves

for the reply. It came in a few minutes. A single sheet of note-paper, with the words :

Cheers. Be down in ten minutes. Order grape-fruit and coffee for me !

I smiled. It was so typical.

The ten minutes had scarcely elapsed when I saw a dainty vision descend the stairs, two tiny hands were shaking mine and a voice cried, banteringly :

" Good gracious, Tony, we *are* early this morning. Is it the spring in the air, or the lack of it in your bed ! "

She laughed gaily, and I gazed with admiration at her dainty colouring, fair hair and sparkling eyes. She had passed the test with flying colours. But it was not to satisfy myself on this point that I was here. Motioning her towards the dining-room, I answered :

" Much more important than that, my dear, but I think we'll have a spot of food first. I'm famished."

Vivienne laughed and led the way to her table. Although she must have been consumed with curiosity, not a hint of it passed her lips. She talked brightly about a thousand unimportant things while the waiter hovered round our table, and it was not until we had reached the cigarette stage and he had gone that she paused and looked at me inquiringly.

" I want your help, Vivienne," I said

gravely, "and I'm not at all certain that you're going to give it."

She stared at me in surprise, while a quizzical smile flitted round her mouth.

"Oh!" Her tone was still bantering. "Well, supposing you try me. What's the trouble?"

"I can't tell you much, dear," I went on slowly. "Hardly anything, in fact, *yet*. Some day perhaps, but I'm afraid if you come into this thing it will have to be blindly. You'll have to trust me."

I paused and looked at her. She nodded.

"Go ahead," she urged quickly.

"I want you to don your most attractive evening dress, my dear, and have supper with a delightful young man, Prince Ali Ben Sura . . . to-night. You are to wear a mask, which I will send you, and impersonate La Belle Masque, the dancer, you know. You will entertain the Prince with your usual charm until I blow along . . . which will be towards midnight. The Prince will be under the impression that La Belle Masque has asked him to supper in view of his devoted attentions, and I want you to play up to the part. He knows nothing whatever about me . . . and must not. Got all that?"

I stopped and smiled at the whimsical expression on her face. Astonishment, dismay, mischief and amusement were all

mingled together. She stared at me in silence for a while, then said ironically :

" And is that all ? "

" That's all," I replied promptly. " Well . . . will you do it ? "

" Of course."

It was the biggest compliment I have ever had in my life. There was no hint of hesitation, no question, no demur. For a moment I stared at her in wonder, then I said softly :

" Thank you, dear."

We smoked for a while in silence, then, after giving her a few more details as to time and place, I added :

" By the way, Ben Sura will be immensely grateful to you when he knows the truth. You'll be doing him a mighty good turn . . . saving his life, in fact."

She caught her breath and gasped :

" Saving his life ? "

I nodded.

" I only told you, dear, because I want you to know it *is* rather urgent. But you've got nothing whatever to worry about. I shall be near you all the time . . . in the next room, in fact, and nothing will happen to either of you ! "

She gave me a fleeting smile, and for another ten minutes we chatted idly, then glancing at my watch I saw that it was time for me to go. Except for ourselves, the dining-room was empty—Londoners are

not early-risers—so, after a hasty glance around, I kissed her gently and hastened from the room. It was half-past seven and I had still much to do.

I hailed a passing taxi and sped off quickly to make my next call. Anyway, the Prince was safe now. I dared not risk leaving him within the range of that poisoned dagger.

BIRDS OF EVIL FEATHER CHAPTER IX

UTTERLY worn out in body, but exultant in mind, I made my way wearily along the familiar roads leading to Jim's head-quarters. As I walked through the narrow passage into which I had gazed with such misgiving on that night which now seemed so long ago, it occurred to me that—were my hopes realised—this would be the last time I should tread that path. I gloried in the thought. The strain of the last two weeks was beginning to have its effect. My nerves were none too steady. I thought of Vivienne and my hopes ran high. If everything went well . . . that longed-for honeymoon abroad would become a certainty. I whistled softly as I crossed the stone court. In a few steps I had reached the door and knocked twice. I flung it open, entered . . . and got the worst shock of my life.

Bound hand and foot to a chair facing the door sat the dare-devil little Irishman, O'Hara, whom I had last seen in the tailor's shop in Soho. There was an ugly bruise under one of his eyes. His expression was villainous. I stood stock-still in the doorway and stared at him mutely. For a second he failed to recognise me, but for a second only.

"Good God, Foster," he cried suddenly, "what the hell are *you* doing here? Did they get you too?"

I still stood motionless and, I am afraid, my face must have betrayed me. The shock had been so sudden, so entirely unexpected—and just at the moment of success. There was a long silence. Greta, Jim and the remainder of the men all sat glaring at me as though stunned. But suddenly Jim's face lightened up. A thought seemed to have struck him; a thought which explained the recognition.

"Why, of course," he said quickly, turning to O'Hara, "you must have known each other when Foster was a member of your gang. Well, he's been with *us* for the last two weeks, and——"

But an ugly scowl had darkened O'Hara's face. He yelled out, in a voice of incredulous fury:

"*For the last two weeks?* Why, he's been with us for a *month*, the dirty sneak."

The game was up! I dashed for the

door, but it was too late. Lu Sing was there before me and had turned the key in the lock. Breathing rather unevenly, I turned round again and stood, with my back to the door, facing them. Had I been less tired, perhaps even then I might have saved the situation; concocted some feasible tale to explain my treachery, but I was dog-weary, and could only stare blankly at them all and wonder what was going to happen next. In a second I knew. At a nod from Jim three of the men jumped up and surrounded me. I was forced into a chair and bound hand and foot so that I was unable to move a muscle. Then, very slowly, Jim walked up to me, a devilish look of anger in his eyes. He suddenly thrust his face close to mine and, glaring at me with diabolical hatred, hissed more than spoke the words:

"So you thought you'd double on me, did you? Been playing about in both camps for the last fortnight and walking off with the goods? You . . . you . . ."

His anger made him mute, but only for a second or two; then he let forth a stream of the foulest oaths which it has ever been my privilege to hear. The others all joined in, O'Hara's voice rising high above the rest, and for a few moments pandemonium seemed to be let loose. I strained every nerve to stop myself from laughing, precarious as was my position: they were

maddened enough as it was ; it would have been fatal to anger them further.

It was Greta who brought sanity back to that room. Her voice, cold as ice, suddenly rose above the uproar.

" Perhaps," she said slowly, " Foster has some explanation."

I turned my head now and looked at her, and, for the moment I almost felt myself to be the thing they considered me . . . a dirty traitor, guilty of the unforgivable crime—double-dealing, treachery. The disappointment and incredulity in her face unnerved me. I stared at her helplessly. What explanation could I make . . . except the real one ?

All the time my mind was a whirl of questions. What on earth was O'Hara doing here ? What evil chance had forced him to this room so rudely to shatter my plans, ruin all hopes of success, imperil my life and . . . what was far more disastrous, make it impossible for me to keep my promise to Vivienne. It was this thought which was agony to me, but I thrust it out of my mind for the moment and glared stonily at my destroyer.

" The . . . devil." It was O'Hara speaking, or, rather, yelling, for his voice was quite out of control. " He's got that twenty thousand, the dirty twister. He fooled the lot of us."

The expression on Jim's face became, if

possible, more evil and forbidding. His lips were drawn into a straight line; his eyes, like living furnaces, glared with anger; his forehead was seamed with a network of villainous-looking lines. It was difficult to stare unmoved at such seething rage; the man seemed a volcano which, in another moment, would erupt and spread desolation in its path. I cringed inwardly, but outwardly I did my utmost to retain a fairly calm exterior.

"So that was your little game, was it?" he barked suddenly, "filling your own pockets while we did the work, you . . . scoundrel. Where's that twenty thousand, eh? What have you done with it?"

There was a dead silence. Everyone's eyes were fixed on me; they were waiting, breathlessly, for my answer. I stared dully back at him, racking my brains for some reply which might be feasible. Suppose I told him the truth? I would be signing my own death warrant. But what could I say that would do me any good? Suddenly, with the brilliance of a comet, an idea occurred to me.

"I buried it," I said curtly.

"*Buried* it? What d'you mean?"

Jim's voice sounded dangerous.

"Under a tree in a wood in Surrey. I . . . hadn't anywhere safe to put it . . . so I buried it."

For a few seconds Jim stared at me

searchingly, then he suddenly rapped out :

" You're lying . . . you hound, you're lying. Trying to save your skin, aren't you ? Well, you're not getting away *this* time. I suppose you thought you'd have the pleasure of guiding us to this wood, eh ? And make your get-away ? Not much."

He walked up to me and before I had the least idea of his intention, raised his fist and brought it down with full force upon my head. The blow reopened the newly-healed wound and for a second I was in terrible agony. I gave a convulsed cry . . . and then everything went black.

When I came to Greta was kneeling beside me, holding a glass of water to my lips. I gave her a smile of thanks and her lips trembled. The glass was suddenly snatched out of her hands and Jim loomed up beside her.

" That's just a taste of what you're going to get, my lad," he laughed brutally. " You'll wish you died the night we threw you into that well, before I've finished with you. Always had my doubts about you from the first. Well, now I'm going to get a bit of my own back. Have you ever heard of Chinese tortures ? "

My face must have betrayed me for he cried gloatingly :

" Ah, I see you have ! Well, Lu Sing here is just as much an adept at them as at hypnotism. He can also "—the look on his face

became satanic—" drive a man slowly mad, so that all the time he knows his brain is going. A delightful sensation, my dear Foster, which you'll be able to sample as soon as you've told us the hiding place of that twenty thousand, which a small taste of Sing's parlour tricks will soon discover."

He laughed cruelly and turned to the others.

" Get the well open. We'll leave him to cool his heels while we're gone."

For a wild moment I felt stunned with joy, for if I had escaped from the well once, why not twice, even though I was trussed-up ? He must have guessed my thought, however, for he laughed cynically.

" Oh, no, you won't escape again, my friend ; the presence of ropes restricting all movement will make that quite impossible."

My heart sank, but, determined to deny him the pleasure of seeing me flinch, I nerved myself to stare at him coldly. Suddenly he turned to the girl, who had been sitting as though turned to stone, a curious, unfathomable expression on her face.

" Get ready, Greta. It's time we went off. Thank heavens he can't mess up our chances *this* evening. I expect he'd have had a try at the emerald as well, if we hadn't found out in time."

Which I most certainly would have done ! My heart was heavy as I thought of all my carefully-laid plans irretrievably ruined,

heavier still when I thought of Vivienne. But I had no time for reflection now.

One of the men had been busy pulling back some chairs and a strip of carpet, bringing to view a trap door. Jim put one hand under the table and pulled back a lever. Slowly and silently the door swung back, a dank, muggy smell reeked through to the room and I saw again the black well into which I had been flung.

Suddenly Greta spoke quickly. There was no trace of emotion of any sort in her voice. It sounded terse and commonplace, as though she were merely stating a fact about which she was not especially interested.

" If you throw him in there, Jim," she said coldly, " who's going to tell us where the twenty thousand is ? "

Jim turned to her and bared his teeth in an unholy grin.

" Oh, I'm not going to kill him, my dear, not for a long time yet. Just damp his spirits a bit."

He came over to me slowly and I saw he was holding a vicious looking knife in his hand. Had it not been for his longing to torture me I should have believed my last hour had come . . . but he had merely come to liberate me from the chair. Cutting the ropes away but binding them firmly round me again, first my legs and then my arms, he cried to the Chink to bring him " the hook." I was at a loss as to his inten-

tions for a second, but then . . . I knew. The Chink had produced a stout rope at the end of which was fixed a great iron hook. This was fastened firmly into my clothes and I was lowered carefully down into the well. As I struck the water a shudder ran through my body. It was icy cold. The rope was lowered until the water reached to my neck.

"No fear of him drowning," I heard Jim mutter. "That would be far too quick . . . and pleasant."

The trap door was drawn back and I was left alone—in utter blackness.

BIRDS OF EVIL FEATHER CHAPTER X

FOR a few minutes I felt stunned, unable to think, unable to do anything but stare blankly into the inky blackness around and strive to overcome shudders of cold. The water was like ice. But if my physical misery was great, that of my mind was far greater. For a while a merciful oblivion dulled my powers of comprehension . . . but for a little while only. Suddenly the veil was torn away and I nearly cried out with agony as I realised my plight. To have the cup of success dashed from my lips like this! To have been so near and be so far!

It was too damnable. For a second I saw red. The calmness into which I had steeled myself vanished. I fought madly to free my limbs from the relentless ropes. I yelled out wild curses against the man who had tied them; against myself for falling a victim to his power; against my crass folly which had led me to involve Vivienne in this infamous business.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, the spasm passed. I became once more calm, I regained once more the full control of my faculties. With a deadly clarity the total consequences of my failure ranged themselves before my mind. I gazed with misery at the downfall of my most cherished hopes; the destruction of weeks of unceasing work; weeks during which I had never, for a moment, been free from danger; weeks during which my days had been passed in the company of a murderous gang of thieves and cut-throats only too ready—had they known my identity—to stick a knife in my back. And all for what? To end my days in this noisome pit whose waters reeked of foulness?

Suddenly a scene came before my mind, a scene conjured up by my imagination, and I was staring in an agony of grief at what I feared might now be happening in a certain room at the Berkeley. Vivienne! I cried her name aloud in my anguish. What was happening to her now? Was she talking quite gaily to the Prince, feeling perhaps a

trifle nervous at her unconventional rôle but not seriously perturbed *for had I not promised her I should be in the next room ready to appear on the stroke of midnight?* It was at this hour that Jim had arranged to enter the room where the Prince was dining, should no light-hearted singing inform him of the success of his plan. What would be the poor girl's fate when he found her foiling *his* masquerade? What deadly vengeance would he wreak on her and the Prince? My heart was like stone within me. I felt deadly sick. *What was the time?*

I was brought back suddenly, with a jerk, to my unwholesome surroundings. I had heard a noise. A shaft of light flashed across the wall in front of me. I gazed at it incredulously, then lifted my head and stared above me. The trap-door had been pulled back and framed in the opening was . . . Greta. I gave a cry of joy.

"Greta!" I cried imploringly. "For God's sake help me!"

But she was already doing so. The rope on which I had been lowered was being pulled up. My feet left the ground, then the water, and I was suspended in mid-air above it. A few seconds later I was hauled through the opening and lay drenched and numb on the floor of the room. Seizing a knife the girl cut through the ropes which bound me and started to rub my hands in order to bring back my circulation. She

poured hot spirit down my throat and thrust a warm coat around me. Gradually the life began to return to my limbs, but I became prey to excruciating pains as the blood rushed back to its normal courses. They left me at last and I was able to stand upright. I looked down at the girl with heart-felt gratitude.

"How can I thank you, Greta?" I stammered. "Why did you do it?"

"Only . . . because I . . . wanted to," she said hesitatingly. We stared at each other for a moment; but then the girl spoke quickly; "Jim would kill me if he knew. I don't know how I can explain your escape . . . but I couldn't leave you here to be tortured by that Chinese devil. I've seen him at work." She shuddered, then gathering her cloak about her—a magnificent ermine coat in honour of the Prince she was to meet—she went on rapidly: "I must dash back now. Jim put me in a taxi going to the Berkeley, but as soon as I got out of sight I told the man to drive back here. I must rush now, though, or I'll keep His Highness waiting." She smiled rather sadly. "You'd better go out first and make tracks for anywhere you like, but make it as far away as possible. If you take my advice, Foster," her tone was very grave, "you'll leave the country at once. Jim makes a bitter enemy."

She shivered.

"Greta," I said quietly, "what's the time?"

She glanced at her watch.

"A quarter to ten."

A quarter to ten! So I had only been in that well of misery for twenty minutes: it had seemed as many hours. A quarter to ten! And Greta here!

I was in time: my plans could stand intact. The sudden change in my fortunes almost overwhelmed me. I turned quickly to the girl.

"Greta, I can't explain now, but you mustn't go to the Berkeley to-night. You've got to stay here."

She stared at me in amazement, her glorious eyes beginning to blaze with anger and contempt.

"What the hell d'you mean?" she cried. "Of course I'm going to the Berkeley. God, you're not trying to double on Jim again, are you?"

She was very white and now took one step towards the door, but I was there before her. I locked it and slipped the key into my pocket.

"Greta," I said quietly, "suppose I were a police officer . . . and all your lot at the Berkeley were going to be arrested? If you stay here you'll be saved . . . and I'm going to make certain that you *do* stay here."

I seized the rope which she had just removed from me and thrust it tightly round

her legs and arms. She fought like a wild cat, cursing me furiously in a variety of strange oaths. Tears of rage and impotence were falling down her cheeks. Never in all my life have I had to undertake a more bitter task. This girl had dared . . . perhaps death itself, for Jim was a relentless foe . . . to save my life and I was repaying her with what appeared on the surface to be the basest ingratitude. As I tied the knots securely, the dripping ropes making ruinous streams over her sumptuous clothes, I had to turn my face away from her own. The sight unnerved me. Suddenly she ceased her tirade and sobbed helplessly.

I lifted her gently into a chair.

" Greta," I murmured, " don't . . . please don't. I'll see that nothing happens to you, dear. But . . . it's my job, Greta. I've got no option."

She stopped crying and glared at me, then burst out in heart-broken tones.

" I don't care what happens to me. Save Jim . . . save Jim, you . . . you . . ."

She yelled curses at me in despair and hatred, and realising that it was useless attempting to comfort her, and also that I was wasting precious time, I walked quickly to the door, slipped out, locked it carefully after me and thrust the key into my pocket.

Had she believed me ?

As I hurried up the steps and across the stone court I wondered what had happened

to O'Hara. Had he been released or taken with them? It was fortunate he had not been left prisoner in the basement room. Greta might have freed him, the moment she understood my intentions, and obtained his aid. The cards were in my hands, however, and I sped swiftly along with a light heart. There was no reason to believe any evil had befallen Vivienne; no reason now to fear that my plans would fail!

I began to sing.

I had arranged that the other gang should all be gathered within the Berkeley, in order, or so they believed, to frustrate Jim's plans. My real intentions, however, were vastly different. I laughed grimly as I hastened on.

BIRDS OF EVIL FEATHER CHAPTER XI

BUT the way was not so clear as I had imagined. Fate had yet another arrow left in her quiver . . . and this time only by the skin of my teeth did I escape her aim. Throwing caution to the winds I had been running up the black passage-way leading into the street, my thoughts intent on the approaching fray, when a sudden sound made me stop instantly and stiffen up against the wall. I had heard footsteps approaching. Someone was about to enter the passage

and, were I to proceed, we should meet face to face in the centre ; a rencontre for which I had no liking. The darkness was intense and I hoped that, were I to remain pressed flat against the wall, my shadow would merge in the obscurity. With every nerve strained and taut I waited motionless for the walker to approach.

A second later a figure appeared in the opening and, with a sinking heart, I realised it was the little Chinaman, Lu Sing. A wave of horror overwhelmed me. He was the last person I had expected to see ; the one whom I dreaded most. In my present exhausted condition I knew I was no match for the little Chink. His uncanny knowledge of the art of jiu-jitsu would easily make up for the difference in our physique and, even were I feeling quite fit, the odds would be in his favour. But after the variety of emotions through which I had passed during the last hour, together with twenty minutes spent up to my neck in icy water, my chances of putting up a passable defence were small. I held my breath and flattened myself still further against the wall.

Then a sudden thought struck me. Lu Sing must be on his way to the basement room. Did he get there my escape would be discovered and Greta released ; all my plans would be overthrown. *He must not get there.* The rôles were now reversed. I realised instantly that I must be the attacker. All

these thoughts flashed through my mind with the rapidity of a shooting star. One moment concealment appeared essential; the next, I was eager to attack.

Walking swiftly, his feet scarcely making a sound on the paved stones of the passage, Lu Sing approached, without in any way suspecting my presence. My trump card lay in a surprise attack. I was still clasping the coat which Greta had thrown round my shoulders and, as the Chink came abreast of me, I lifted it up and flung it firmly over his head. He gave a muffled cry and fought wildly, but I was pinning both arms to his sides and he was helpless. Unfortunately I had nothing with which to bind him, no weapons of any sort with which to ensure his impotence. He continued to struggle madly and the strain was telling on me dangerously. There was only one thing to do . . . and I did it. I tripped him up suddenly so that he fell heavily on to the stones of the passage-way. Before he could jump up, a crashing blow from my fist sent him back again . . . and this time he lay motionless. I waited awhile fearing his unconsciousness might be feigned, then, reassured, removed the coat. My fist had done its work only too well. There was a nasty bruise over one eye and a little trickle of blood falling down his cheek. For a moment I thought he was dead . . . but he still breathed fitfully. Using the coat as a rope I bound it round his

arms and knotted it firmly, then lifting him on to my shoulder I sped swiftly out of the passage and into the street.

Lu Sing weighed very little, but, even so, my breath was coming in painful gasps when, turning out of the unfrequented part from which I had come, I entered a well-lit street bordered on either side by shops. Few people were about, however, and nobody seemed to notice anything strange in my appearance. Perhaps they thought Lu Sing was drunk ; the sight of one man being carried by another not being unusual in that part of the world. I hastened on and, with untold relief, caught sight of a taxi rank. I hailed one quickly, thrust Lu Sing in before me and directed the man to drive to Scotland Yard, promising him double fare if he broke all records. Never did man strive harder to obtain his reward. Choosing the most deserted streets, he drove that taxi as though there were a devil after us. We turned corners with an inch to spare, and it was with unmeasured relief that, arrived at my destination, I clambered out, hauling the Chink after me, and told the driver to wait while I collected his fare.

Surprised faces greeted me as I entered the Yard, but in a very few minutes I had explained the identity of my burden, borrowed enough for the taxi, paid off the man, changed my clothes and departed in a

car, without wasting any more time, towards the Berkeley.

Arrived at the hotel, I gave my name and was taken immediately to a little room wherein an anxious-faced superintendent greeted me in surprise.

" Why, what's happened, Inspector ? Anything gone wrong ? I thought you were staying in the other room until midnight."

This had been my intention, of course, but the unfortunate recognition by O'Hara had entirely altered things. Still it made little difference in which room I waited ; enough that, at twelve o'clock, we should meet once more . . . in the room between us. For the room in which I sat was on the right of that engaged by Jim for Greta ; the room in which Jim waited lay on its left. I smiled to myself grimly. The Berkeley was seeing unexpected, and probably unwelcome, life to-night.

It was now eleven. An hour must elapse before the final curtain ; an hour during which time lay very heavily on my hands. Suspense has a marvellous knack of stretching out each second into the length of five minutes—an abominable gift which I fully recognised and detested that night. After I had explained the events of the night to the keenly-interested superintendent there was nothing left to do but wait—with eyes fixed on the clock, ears agog for any sound, until the fatal hour arrived. I

wondered what were Vivienne's thoughts during this anxious hour. Was she also stealing glances at the clock, praying for midnight to come? Had the Prince any clue as to her masquerade? What was happening on the other side of the dividing wall?

Had I known I should have been more astonished even than I could have foretold. Events had fallen out contrary to all my expectations: to all Jim's expectations also. Had I been able to see into the heart of Prince Ali Ben Sura all my plans would have been altered. Vivienne would never have entered that room. But all men's hearts are hidden from each other, and I had made the unforgivable mistake of underrating my opponent—for until the stroke of midnight I must consider the Prince as such. He could do so much to wreck my scheme, so much to help it.

The hands of the little marble clock were on the stroke of midnight. Instantly all my fears and doubts fled. I lifted the automatic with which the superintendent had provided me and tiptoed to the door. Taking infinite pains to make no sound, I opened it gently and peered cautiously around. There was no sound in the passage; no one was in sight. I pulled the door to again, leaving it slightly ajar so that we could hear the slightest noise, then I turned and smiled at Superintendent Forrester. He was standing behind me, a similar revolver gripped in his

hand, a look of eager expectancy on his face. Hardly daring to draw our breath we waited motionless, our ears strained for the faintest sound which would tell us a door was opening.

And suddenly it came. A tiny creak which would have fallen unnoticed by ears unkeyed to such a pitch of reception as our own. Then came the unmistakable sound of cautious footsteps. Without pausing for another moment, I slipped through the door, the superintendent close on my heels, and I levelled my gun at the dumbfounded faces of Jim and his accomplice.

"*Evening, Jim. Put up your hands.*"

I spoke very low, almost in a whisper, but quite loud enough to be heard easily. And even as I did so, even as I stood there confronting the two men, exulting in the confusion writ large upon their faces, a sound came to my ears, a sound which drove away once and for all any thoughts of triumph, filling me instead with a sickening fear. For from the other side of that door before which we were standing there had come a cry—a cry which was both a shriek of terror and a panic-stricken call for help.

Vivienne!

Without wasting another moment on the men before me, I turned my back upon them and flung myself against the door. It was locked. I stood back a second so as to throw my whole weight upon it, and

as I did so another shriek, wild with appeal and increasing fear, came to my ears, filling me on the instant with the strength of a madman. The door was of solid make, but before the determined battery of my assault it collapsed like rotten cardboard. In a second I was within that room.

I paused for an instant after my entrance, and through the red mist which, ever since that first cry, had been floating persistently before my eyes, I saw the dear face of Vivienne, white as chalk, with a look of such fear upon it as I hope never to see again on any woman's face as long as I live. She was held fast in the arms of a tall man, whose silken turban left no doubt as to his identity. In his hand he was holding a mask, as though he had but a moment before snatched it from its owner. He was laughing gently, cruelly, deriding the girl's futile efforts to escape, and even as I hurtled through the door and burst into the room I saw his face bend nearer to the girl's.

I jumped forward and for a few moments everything was a blank; time itself seemed to stand still. I was conscious of nothing —nothing save the fact that beneath me on the floor was a being whom I hated, a detestable thing, a man who had dared to lay impious hands upon the girl I loved. As I fought a wild joy filled my breast, and it was with a feeling of intense anger that at last I realised other hands were now

upon me, dragging me from my prey. I struggled madly to free myself, but my strength was nearly spent, and with a savage fury I turned on the men who held me.

They were Forrester and a plain-clothes man.

The sight seemed to drive away the mists of red which so confused my mind. I stared around me more calmly now, and with a jolt of surprise I realised that the room was full of people, while beyond the shattered door a mass of startled faces filled the opening. Lying gasping upon the sofa was my late opponent, the silken turban, with its massive jewel stuck at a rakish angle upon his lolling head, while standing before me, dancing almost in an access of rage, the reason for which I was far from comprehending, was a tiny little man of foreign aspect.

But it was not on him, nor on the Prince that my dazed eyes had now become fixed. For bending over his prostrate form was a tall woman, attired in a sumptuous evening cloak, over whose delicate features a tiny slit of silk was drawn, screening her eyes.

La Belle Masque! What was she doing here? Was she the real Belle Masque? Had she known . . . ?

A mist, a black one this time, danced before my eyes, and with a crash I fell senseless upon the floor. The Prince had proved no mean antagonist.

* * * * *

"So I'm afraid you owe His Highness an apology. The fact is, the Prince came here to-night not alone, but accompanied by an old friend of his, La Belle Masque, and his secretary, Mr. Dabrino. They were hidden behind that curtain throughout the evening."

Forrester stopped and pointed towards a thick silk curtain that hung before an alcoved window seat. It was ten minutes later, and fully recovered, I was being supplied with explanations, explanations which, although entirely welcome, had made me very much regret my attack upon the Prince.

I turned to him now with profuse apologies, but with a courteous gesture he cut them short.

"Not at all, my dear sir, not at all. Your action was entirely understandable, and, in any other circumstances, entirely praiseworthy. It is for me to apologise to Miss Strand—I have already done so—for my abominable behaviour, but knowing she was an impostor I thought the only way to find out what she was really after was by making love to her. With unfortunate results to me," he added with a dry smile, rubbing his right arm significantly. "Besides," he added, and his smile had broadened somewhat, "in view of the fact that you've not only saved my emerald but also, very probably, my life . . . well . . . it's hardly complimentary to apologise, is it?"

THE next day I presented myself at the Yard and was received most flatteringly by a delighted superintendent. Forrester expressed himself extremely gratified by the success of my little effort—which, I was thankful to learn, had been spectacular. Upon information I supplied there had been a general comb-out of the most notorious dives in London; certain unruly members of the criminal world whom I had particularly named were now cooling their heels in jail, uttering strange oaths in their bewilderment as to who had informed on them. After my abrupt desertion of him at the crucial moment, Forrester had taken the situation in hand—with dramatic results. Jim's accomplice, the youth with the receding chin, was now under lock and key, but Jim, having opened fire at the superintendent, had received in exchange a wound from which he was not expected to recover—a fact which, I am afraid, did not grieve me much. In any case, he would have had to die . . . on the scaffold if not in his bed . . . and the latter was obviously the better way. By his downfall the power of the gangs was completely destroyed, and, for a while, a grateful lull in the underworld's activities was bound to follow.

"By the way," said the superintendent

suddenly, " was Corboni glad to get back his opals ? "

" Quite delighted, sir," I answered. " Just about as pleased, in inverse ratio, as the lovely Greta was to give them up. I was extremely diplomatic and thanked him with all my heart for his collaboration in lending them to me. I must say that I think that loan turned the whole scale in my favour."

" That's all very well," said the superintendent quietly, " but for all that you deserve a good deal of credit, young man. You went through a lot to get that crew of scoundrels. I'm afraid Inspector MacPherson hit you rather hard in the car that night of the bank robbery ? "

I laughed ruefully.

" Yes, sir, but perhaps that was also a good thing in the end, although I didn't quite see it in that light at the time ! "

" He's very thorough, is Inspector MacPherson ! "

" Quite. Have you handed back the stolen goods to the bank yet ? "

The superintendent smiled.

" The manager, of course, knew about it all along. The night watchman has been fired in order to keep up appearances, but suitably provided for and found a better job, so that's all clear."

" I'm sorry I was so long about rounding up the gangs, sir, but I was determined to be absolutely certain that I would get every

single member of both gangs at the same time, as it would have been very difficult to trace and round them all up if they had had any warning of danger. That's why I had to let them have a little activity, a little rope with which to hang themselves."

The superintendent beamed.

"My dear fellow, don't apologise. I knew it would take a little time. Good heavens, its huge success in the end has been ample reward for any delay."

He paused and my thoughts flew to a certain cell amongst those which at that moment housed my late companions. About Greta I still felt a shade uneasy. A hasty visit to the basement room on the previous night had resulted in a livid but passionately angry woman being conveyed to the cells. She had cursed me savagely when I approached her, calling me a thousand unsavoury epithets, but I hope that—after I had managed to shorten her sentence considerably, which I was determined to do—she might feel less bitter towards me.

Forrester ended by saying that my promotion was now assured and that I could take a holiday. There was a genial light in his eye as he shook hands.

"I hear you're getting married," he said pleasantly. "Well, the best of luck to you and the little lady you're marrying. We're all extremely grateful to her for her help last night."

I thanked him warmly and hastened out in search of Vivienne.

We were married a week later and among our wedding presents were two which I shall treasure all my days. One, a marvellously carved buhl cabinet on which was inscribed in letters of gold :

To Detective Inspector Antony Chalmers and his wife in grateful admiration—from Prince Ali Ben Sura.

The other—a letter, an extraordinarily charming letter, from Superintendent Forrester, which had accompanied a munificent cheque.

You're on the mountain path, Chalmers (it ran). *Stick to it and your next big job will lead you to the crest.*

My next big job ! Well, the honeymoon is to last a fortnight, and then I shall be ready.

DEATH AT GREY TILES

THE curtain fell on the first act.

John Ross, alone in his box, sighed. It was not a sigh of regret that the play was already half over, for in truth the man could scarcely have told what it was all about. Rather was the sigh an expression of boredom : Ross had been hoping it would not be necessary for him to remain in the theatre after the main interval, but now he knew that unless he were greatly in luck the task for which he was there could not be completed until after the end of the play.

He rose from the innermost shadows at the back of the box and stretched himself. No harm in having a drink, anyway. He pulled a massive cigarette case from his hip-pocket and taking a cigarette applied a match to it. Then, opening the door of the box, he passed out and down the passage which separated him from the stalls.

All about him was an excited buzz of conversation. The play was evidently a success, for the stalls were crowded with smart men and still smarter women who obviously belonged to the fashionable world. Now the ladies were talking shrilly to one another, exchanging enthusiastic comments

on the show. For the most part the men were congregated at the top of a stairway which, Ross knew well enough, led to the bar. He joined them.

There was a short delay while the throng of men, far too great for the inadequate stairway, sorted itself out. Ross's keen eye, trained to observe people and things rapidly and without ostentation, carefully scanned the stalls. From just under his nose a woman's voice spoke in astonishment.

"John!"

He looked down.

"Good gracious! Norma!"

The words escaped him involuntarily. Ross disliked giving away any inkling of his innermost thoughts or feelings, and he flushed slightly as if with annoyance. The woman who had addressed him was attractive: though approaching middle-age she gave the impression at first sight of being many years younger.

"Fancy meeting you here!" she laughed. "I thought you rather disapproved of such light affairs as musical comedies!"

Ross smiled in return.

"I thought I'd come to this one for a change," he said. "One might as well try all sorts, and I had heard this show well spoken of."

"You're quite sure you aren't here on . . . on business?"

An almost imperceptible movement of his

hand, which yet she noticed, prevented the woman from pursuing the interrogation.

"Ah!" she said, satisfied.

He changed the conversation abruptly.

"How's Herbert?"

Was it his imagination or did she really seem ill at ease? With veiled eyes which seemed to be merely resting idly on her face, Ross scrutinised his fair friend keenly. Why should this perfectly ordinary question cause a flutter of perturbation, almost of alarm? What, after all, more natural than that he should ask after the health of her husband, his friend, through whom he had first become acquainted with this charming lady? Yet he knew well that his practised instinct had not been at fault.

But, after the momentary perturbation, the answer came smoothly enough.

"Better, thank you, John. As old Professor Doveton was available to come and spend the evening with him, I took the opportunity of rushing up to London for a few hours' holiday."

Almost too ready, thought Ross; almost as if that answer had been prepared against emergency. He looked at the vacant stall beside her.

"Alone?"

"Er . . . no. Dr. Phillips told me I ought to have a little change from the constant cares of nursing Herbert. He suggested this little outing."

"A very good idea, too. You mustn't tire yourself out."

Ross gave no outward sign of his strange inward feelings.

"I was just going to get a little liquid refreshment," he smiled. "Shall I find Edwin at the bar?"

"More than likely!" she answered.

"Oh, by the way, Norma," Ross's tone was bantering, "you seem to be getting rather a wild and law-breaking crowd down in your part of the world—sleepy little village though you call it!"

"Wild? Law-breaking? What do you mean?"

"What about the . . . murder?"

Intentionally, John Ross dwelt on the last word: to his amazement he saw the woman before him lose colour. He quickly took his eyes from her face, for experience had taught him that hands tell very nearly as much as faces and are less easily controlled after the first shock.

Norma Rendel was gripping the sides of her seat, gripping them so hard that the blood had been driven from the knuckles, leaving them dead white.

Once again Ross looked his friend in the eyes.

"On the face of it," he said, "it seems a very ordinary story. I don't suppose the local lads will call us in, although your particular Chief Constable is very good over

that sort of thing; he always calls in the Yard experts as soon as ever any mysterious features arise. I wish to heaven I could say that of more of them!"

He laughed, a trifle harshly.

"But if they do," he continued, "I'll get the job and come down and stay with you and Herbert. May I?"

"Of course."

She hesitated, but the words were said genially enough. Ross, however, never moved his piercing gaze from her face.

"Are you sure I shan't be in the way, with Herbert ill? You know I can easily stay at the local pub!"

"Oh, no!" This time she did not hesitate. "Herbert would be furious if you did that, and so should I. No, John, if you come to our part of the world you must always stay with us."

"It's very kind of you, Norma. I'll remember that—with gratitude."

Ross noticed that she had now recovered full mastery of herself.

"Well, I'll probably see you at the end of the show. I'll go and seek out Edwin now."

He took her proffered hand and pressed it gently; then he made off down the stairway, clear now of the crowd which had a few minutes ago been endeavouring to struggle down it.

He made his way towards the far counter,

through the congested throng which surrounded it, his eyes moving rapidly hither and thither on the look-out for Edwin Phillips . . . and that other, the reason for his presence in the theatre that night. As he moved in and out of the crowd he saw one or two men nudge their companions and point him out to them. It rather pleased him : he knew what they were saying : " See that fellow there ? Yes, the shortish, thick-set man. That's Inspector John Ross, the famous Scotland Yard detective. He's supposed to be the fellow who has brought more murderers to the gallows than any other detective in the history of the police. You'd never think it, would you ? He looks awfully strong, certainly ; but he's got such a kind and meek expression ! "

John Ross smiled to himself ; he liked to be thought meek and mild.

Suddenly he caught sight of Edwin Phillips. The doctor was standing at one end of the bar, holding a glass in his hand. Ross approached him from behind and unexpectedly placed one great hand on his shoulder.

The effect was remarkable. Phillips whipped round in alarm, nearly spilling his drink as he did so. Ross chuckled darkly.

" Evening, Edwin."

" Good God ! " Dr. Phillips was obviously inclined to be irritable. " I do wish you wouldn't do that, John ! How often have

I told you that perfectly innocent men will react to that trick of yours ? "

" Precisely why I do it. Rather good fun."

" Well . . . you shouldn't."

The two friends smiled at each other.

" What are you doing here ? I thought you never came to a theatre. Are you chasing some poor devil . . . ? "

The doctor stopped abruptly : a firm pressure on his arm convinced him, as clearly as words could have done, that the subject was not welcomed by the great detective.

" I've just seen Norma."

" Oh, have you ? "

Ross looked at the doctor.

Phillips seemed to examine his glass for a moment. Then he went on rapidly.

" Norma's had a rotten time lately. She won't let me get in a nurse for Herbert and insists upon looking after him herself entirely, except for the help of that lady's maid of hers. I took advantage of a slight improvement in Herbert's condition this afternoon to bring her up to a theatre for a bit of a change. Especially as old Doveton was coming to talk coins to Herbert."

For a moment Ross did not answer. He was occupied with his own thoughts. The reply was good enough. He could find no flaw, and yet to Ross's highly sensitive ear there had sounded something in it that was not quite straight—a certain glibness—yes,

glib was the word—almost as if the speech had been rehearsed. And, funnily enough, he had received just that impression when Norma had told him the same thing a few minutes earlier.

"I see. An excellent idea. Tell me, Edwin, how *is* Herbert?"

"Pretty bad really, I'm afraid."

"No need to be evasive with me. After all, I am one of his oldest friends."

"Well," said Dr. Phillips slowly, "he's better to-day, but I fear it's only a flash in the pan."

"You mean . . . ?"

"That he can't recover? Yes, I do. It's only a matter of time now."

"How long?"

"Impossible to say. Might be days; might be weeks. One can't tell in a case like this. Medical science can tell us a lot, John, but it hasn't yet been able to tell us how long we can wait on a heart." He raised his eyebrows and gave the self-important little smile with which a doctor generally accompanies such vague professional pronouncements.

John Ross looked away. The drink he had ordered was now served to him. He paid for it and raised it to his lips, but all the time he felt uneasy. Something warned his alert senses that all was not as it should be. He felt he was being watched for the effect these words might have upon him. He turned his

head suddenly, determined to follow up his idea.

" Poor old fellow. I really must run down and see him as soon as I possibly can."

As he pronounced the words he watched Phillips carefully. There was a moment's pause, an almost imperceptible space of time before the latter replied.

" Yes, by all means do. I am sure he would like to see you."

But there was little enthusiasm in his tone.

Ross knew the value of not pressing things too far, so he changed the subject quickly.

" Were you called in about that murder case you've had down in Arborfield ? " Very slightly he stressed the word " murder."

Phillips looked at him sharply, but gave no other sign of having noticed it.

" I was."

" Anything interesting ? "

" A pretty clear case, I should say."

" I imagined so. I'm rather sorry, because I hoped they'd call in the Yard and I might go down. I've just told Norma that if I do, I shall ask myself to stay with them."

" Oh, yes," said Phillips, without warmth. " Of course."

" I'm not wanted," said Ross to himself. " I'm not wanted. Now why ? "

" As a matter of fact," said the doctor suddenly, after a momentary pause, " I don't think there is the slightest likelihood of the local police asking for any outside help.

We've got a new lad in charge of the district, fellow called Page. Most efficient he seems. I was talking . . ."

He was interrupted by the warning bell for the second act and they found themselves involved in the usual last-minute exodus to the stairs.

Unexpectedly Ross left his friend. He moved silently but with purpose and rapidity. He reached the door of the bar and drew alongside a tall man in immaculate evening dress.

" Just a minute, please."

Dr. Phillips, watching, saw two other men clothed in evening dress, but with " plain clothes policeman " invisibly written all over them, detach themselves from the crowd and range quietly one on each side of the stranger. All their movements were unostentatious.

" So he's got his man ! "

Dr. Phillips shuddered : he knew Ross's reputation for running his quarry to earth.

" Poor devil ! " he said to himself. Then he rejoined Norma in the stalls.

As Detective-Inspector Ross walked home that night, he felt none of the exultation which usually accompanied a fresh success. He was lost in thought. Why the uneasiness ? why that suspicious glibness on the part of Norma Rendel and then Dr. Edwin Phillips ? Why, if Phillips the medical adviser pronounced death inevitably not far

away, did the condemned Herbert Rendel's wife accompany the doctor to a theatre ?

And there were other questions which worried him, worried him so much that the great John Ross began to wonder whether he were not getting past his work and making an obsession of suspicion.

DEATH AT GREY TILES CHAPTER II

DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR JOHN ROSS elected to walk from the little station of Arborfield up to Grey Tiles, the beautiful country mansion of his friend, Herbert Rendel. He knew the way well enough ; often before had he made the short journey on foot. But as he passed the village inn he stopped and deposited his suit-case with the landlord. He had come, at the conclusion of his case the night before, to see his old friend while there was still time, but he did not want to burden the household with his presence for the night in the present condition of anxiety and worry. Far better, he told himself, to put up at the inn close by.

As he continued his walk in the gathering dusk, his thoughts were in something of a turmoil. His presence at the theatre on the previous night had not been welcome to two old friends. Why ? John Ross was

labouring under a sensation which he, more than most men, loathed. He was puzzled.

He took a short cut through a small wood, still deep in his thoughts. A few yards farther on he came out into the main road, followed it for a yard or two and turned in through the lodge gates of Grey Tiles. Five minutes later he was standing at the massive front door and had rung.

A butler admitted him.

"Good evening, Jenkins."

"Ah. Good evening, Mr. Ross. An unexpected pleasure, sir."

Ross's voice was gruff as he replied:

"I was passing. Thought I'd hop out of the train at Arborfield and see Mr. Rendel. How is he?"

Jenkins's face clouded.

"Not well, sir. I understand that Dr. Phillips takes a very serious view of the case."

"Yes."

"You knew?"

"I did. I saw Dr. Phillips in London last night."

"I see, sir."

There was a pause.

"Shall I inform Mrs. Rendel that you are here, sir?"

"If you please, Jenkins."

The man ushered Ross into a little sitting-room and left him there to go on his errand. Ross wandered about the room looking idly

at the various photographs and trinkets that were about, finally coming to rest in a big arm-chair by the fire. Some minutes went by, and he wondered why Norma should be so long in coming to welcome him. Could it be that she was not too pleased at his unexpected visit? He thought again of her curiously uneasy attitude on the previous evening, and her embarrassed reaction to the little verbal trap he had set for her.

Metaphorically he shook off his suspicions.

"Damn it, John," he said to himself, "you've got your work on your brain. You see evil in everyone and everything."

At that moment he heard steps approaching the room, and he rose to meet his hostess. The door opened and Norma Rendel stood on the threshold.

How handsome she looked as she stood there! Ross had always admired her; tall, dignified and only just approaching middle-age, she held in her bearing a dignity unattainable by real youth, and the serene beauty of her face had that strongest of all attractions—character. In the few seconds it took Ross to think these thoughts she had advanced towards him, holding out her hand in welcome.

"John," she cried, "how splendid! You did not tell us last night that you would be coming down. I had no idea you would be anywhere in the neighbourhood."

Ross took her hand, and as he did so he

noticed that it was icy cold and rather clammy, almost as if she were nervous.

"I have just finished a case," he said, "and after what Edwin told me last night about Herbert, I felt I must seize the first opportunity of coming down to see him. How is he to-day?"

"About the same," she answered dully.

Then she went on with sudden vehemence:

"That's the trouble, John, he's always 'about the same.'"

There was a note of suppressed impatience underlying her words which struck at once on Ross's sensitive ear, a note of something which seemed to him sinister. But the impression was a slight one and her next words erased it almost entirely from his mind.

"If only he would make some improvement," she said unhappily. "It is so terrible for him, hanging about like this. We are all desperately anxious about him."

"I am so sorry," said Ross quietly. "Is he well enough to see me?"

"Oh, yes, for a short time. It does him good to see people, especially old friends like you. But you mustn't be more than a few minutes, John."

"Of course not."

From the passage outside came the sound of running footsteps and a young girl burst into the room.

"Uncle John!" she cried. "How splendid

to see you! It's ages since I saw you last! Jenkins told me you had come."

"Hallo, my dear. You have grown up! You're looking blooming."

He kissed her warmly. The last time he had seen Marion Rendel had been some three years before, when she had been home on holiday from school. Since then, whenever he had visited the Rendels, their daughter had always been away at school or abroad. Now, in the charming fair creature who had greeted him with such delight, he had some difficulty in recognising the rather awkward child he remembered. As so often happens, the late teens had brought out all the girl's unsuspected loveliness and had invested her with a woman's slim grace. Before, she had been a rather coltish schoolchild, engagingly frank and sincere, and Ross had been very fond of her then, if only for her boyish bluntness. Now the frankness and sincerity were there, and added to them that unconscious grace and enthusiastic preoccupation with everything in life that comes to the young girl but newly grown-up. Marion was so obviously delighted to see him again that Ross was soon deep in talk with her, and Norma Rendel said with a smile:

"You two seem to have lots to say to one another. I'll just run up and see if Herbert can see you now, John."

Marion babbled on, telling him her experiences in Germany, where she had been

studying, until Norma Rendel's voice was heard at the door.

" Herbert is delighted at the idea of seeing you. Will you come up ? "

She led the way upstairs to a room on the first floor landing, and opened the door.

" Herbert, here's John," she said. " I'll leave you to yourselves for a few minutes, so that you can have a chat."

She closed the door and left them.

Ross was shocked by the difference in Herbert Rendel since last he had seen him. The man appeared to be at the point of death. Formerly he had been a ruddy, cheerful, rather rotund individual. Now he was incredibly wasted. His skin was mottled and bluish. He lay back on his pillows, with unnaturally bright eyes gazing out from painfully hollowed sockets, and greeted his visitor with the ghost of a smile.

" Evening, John."

" Evening, Herbert."

" Nice of you to come."

John Ross smiled.

" Nonsense. I wasn't busy and I was down in these parts, so I thought I'd call in to see how you were getting on."

" Darn badly."

The invalid jerked out the two words savagely and his vehemence rather startled his visitor.

" Eh ? "

"I said darned badly. And I meant it. I'm a certainty for the other side, John."

Ross sat down in the chair beside the bed.

"Don't be a fool. Many people have recovered from worse attacks than yours."

The invalid croaked out a cynical laugh.

"None of your best bedside manner, please!"

There was nothing to be said. Ross, looking at the shrivelled figure in the bed before his eyes, saw how palpably true the words were; from outward appearances at least, Herbert Rendel could not possibly have long to live.

"I'm very glad you've come, John . . . come in time."

"Come in time! I'm delighted to be here, Herbert, but really you are getting morbid, you know. It won't do. I shall see you lots of times again."

"You will not."

The decision in the voice was marked, and Ross looked at his friend sharply. Even allowing for the obstinacy of an invalid, Ross felt that there was something in this which needed his careful attention.

"I am quite positive of that, so positive that I have written you a letter. You will get it quite soon after my death."

"A letter? After your death?" Ross laughed, but not very convincingly. "What fresh nonsense is this?"

Herbert Rendel pulled himself up on one

elbow and with a great effort leant forward towards the detective.

" It's not nonsense, John. Watch them ! Stay here the night and watch them ! Promise me you will ! "

" Of course I'll stay the night if you'd like me to," said Ross deliberately, " but who on earth do you want me to watch ? "

The elder man cackled.

" Hasn't the famous instinct of the great Inspector Ross made that clear yet ? "

" No."

" Well, watch Norma for a start."

" Norma ! "

" Yes . . . and the man she's in love with ! "

Ross leapt to his feet ; but instantly he controlled himself and slowly sat down again.

" What's the matter ? Have you already noticed it, then ? "

The almost malicious eagerness of Rendel's voice made Ross shudder. Then, choosing his words with care, he spoke quietly.

" Herbert, I don't doubt that you mean what you say, but I'm sure it's the result of a fevered imagination. As far as I know, Norma is in love only with her husband—with you."

" More bedside manner ! That's right, comfort the poor sick man ! "

Suddenly Rendel leant forward again, and Ross noticed with apprehension that his face was gleaming with sweat.

" Watch them ! Watch them ! Watch them ! "

Each word was spoken with gradually increasing emphasis, until he almost screamed the last one. Then he sank back on his pillows exhausted.

Ross bent down and spoke almost in his ear.

" Watch Norma and . . . who ? "

There was no answer. Herbert Rendel lay back with closed eyes, breathing rapidly.

" Watch Norma and . . . who ? "

Rendel gave no sign that he had heard.

Ross straightened himself and sat back in his chair. For a few moments he sat silent and motionless. Then suddenly the door opened.

" You've been quite long enough." It was Marion. She stood smiling in the doorway. " Daddy's not allowed to talk for more than ten minutes at a time, Uncle John. You've had more than that already."

Ross rose to his feet and looked down at the sick man. His eyes were open again and his lips moved. Ross leant down to the level of Rendel's head.

" Watch them, John ! "

The words were inaudible save to the man for whom they were intended. Ross smiled and nodded reassuringly ; then turning, he followed Marion from the room.

As they went down the stairs Marion looked at him.

"What do you think about him, Uncle John?"

He looked at the girl, radiant with beauty and health, as she moved easily beside him. He shrugged his shoulders non-committally.

"I'm not a doctor, Marion."

"Which means that you won't say. Tell me, though . . . do you think he is very near the end?"

Ross saw no reason for holding back his opinion.

"Yes, my dear," he said gently. "I think he is very, very near indeed."

The girl made no reply; and they quickly joined Norma Rendel in the sitting-room.

"You'll stay to dinner, John, won't you? There's a very good train to town about ten, I think."

Marion looked at her mother in mild surprise. Let her dear "Uncle" John go back to town at that time of night, instead of putting up with them as he always did!

"As a matter of fact I meant to stay the night at the inn and I have left a case there," replied Ross quietly; if he felt any surprise at Norma Rendel's unusual behaviour, he did not show it. She was generally hospitable and a most gracious hostess, and again he realised, with a sensation of amazement, that he was not wanted. But . . . the old man upstairs had warned him to stay.

"In that case," Norma was saying, "of course you must stay with us. I thought

you'd probably be wanting to get back to town to-night. Shall I send over for your case ? "

" Thanks very much, Norma. I should love to stay, but I'll get my suit-case myself. I should rather like the walk before dinner."

Ross walked slowly, meditating as he went on the extraordinary request, almost command, which had been made to him by the man lying on his death-bed in the house he had just left ; the inspector's mood was in tune with the gathering twilight around him.

" Watch them ! " Rendel had said, but whom was he to watch ? Norma and " the man she loves." Had he stumbled on something of the truth last night when he had seen Norma and Dr. Phillips in London together ?

Lost in his thoughts Ross did not really notice where he was going, and all at once he became aware of a house standing by itself on his right. A red lamp, already illumined, showed up the word " Surgery " in large black letters. Ross yielded to an impulse and turned in at the gate. The maidservant who opened the door to him went away and returned saying the doctor was busy with his surgery patients, but would Ross mind waiting a few minutes. He was shown into the doctor's room. Sitting there among the paraphernalia of bottles and test-tubes which form the make-up of the country doctor's consulting-room, Ross's mind continued its

interrupted speculations on the strange incidents of the last few hours.

The door opened and the doctor entered. He greeted Ross and crossed to the basin to wash his hands.

"Have you come down to see Herbert?" he said, over his shoulder, the soap still clinging to his hands.

"Yes," said Ross deliberately. "After what you told me last night I felt I must take the first opportunity of seeing him, and I must say I'm shocked at the change in the old fellow since I was here last. What do you really think of him?"

The doctor reached for the towel which hung on a peg beside the basin.

"I told you last night. The end might come at any time. Are you staying at Grey Tiles?"

"Yes. I meant to stay at the inn, but Norma has asked me up there. That reminds me. I mustn't forget to collect my bag from the inn."

"If you go and get it while I change, I'll walk back with you. I'm dining there."

Shortly afterwards the two were walking up to the house together. They talked of casual matters; neither made any further reference to Herbert Rendel's condition.

Arrived at the house the doctor went straight to the sick-room, while Ross joined Norma Rendel and Marion in the hall.

Soon Mrs. Rendel said:

"Run up to your father, dear. The doctor must have finished by now. I'll be up in a minute to change." Then turning to Ross she added, by way of explanation, "We never leave Herbert alone, in case anything should happen. Besides, it keeps him cheerful and interested. When I've changed I shall release Marion to dress. That's how we manage."

Rising, she showed Ross to his room. Half an hour later he walked along the passage on his way to the drawing-room.

As he passed the slightly open door of Rendel's room, Mrs. Rendel came out.

"Oh, John," she said, "do you mind staying with Herbert for a few minutes while I find my maid? She always sits with him during dinner."

"Of course I will."

Ross entered the room and sat down by the patient.

Rendel's eyes were closed. He was apparently asleep.

Five minutes later Simpson, the maid, came to the door.

Ross put a finger to his lips.

"He is asleep," he whispered.

The girl nodded, smiled and tiptoed into the room.

"I shall be all right now, sir, thank you," she murmured, and Ross went downstairs.

As he entered the drawing-room Marion

came rushing up to him, seized him by the hand and cried :

" Uncle John, I want to introduce you to my fiancé, Inspector Page ! "

Ross turned and found himself face to face with a tall, well-set-up young man, who was smiling somewhat sheepishly.

" Dear me," cried Ross. " How time does fly ! Seems only yesterday that I was choosing dolls and candy for this young lady. Pleased to meet you, Inspector. Heard a lot about your doings in this part of the world. Pretty smart, eh ? "

Page, a trifle overawed at this meeting with the renowned Scotland Yard detective, whom he had privately instituted as his model, blushed with embarrassed delight at the kindly greeting.

" Good evening, sir. Thank you, sir."

But the two men had no time to get to know each other better at the moment. Dinner was announced and they entered the dining-room. The meal was not a gay affair. To Ross's sensitised mind it appeared as though each one were striving to lend their support to the conversation, their thoughts, however, being engaged on far different things. He was puzzled ; there was something decidedly wrong here, an atmosphere of gloom hung about the room, an unrest which could not entirely be accounted for by the fact that not far away there lay a dying man. Sadness, anxiety, desultory conversation

might easily result from that—but here there was an underlying feeling of suspense which was definitely unpleasant.

During one of the more than usually prolonged pauses, steps were heard on the stairs. The door was flung open and the maid, Simpson, rushed in. She was dead white and obviously terrified.

"Doctor!" she cried, "doctor — the master!"

Phillips was on his feet in an instant and ran from the room. Norma, with a little stifled cry, followed him at once. Marion burst into tears. Then she too ran out of the room and up the stairs.

Ross and Page waited in tense anticipation until ten minutes later Dr. Phillips returned to the room.

"Well?" asked John Ross.

"He's dead," answered Phillips curtly.

DEATH AT GREY TOWERS CHAPTER III

Ross sat puffing at his pipe on the terrace. The warm sunshine beating down upon him had the effect of slightly stupefying his thoughts, and he mused idly, but without much concentration, on the events of the previous evening.

He had that morning telephoned to London,

to the office of Rendel's solicitors, for there he had guessed was likely to be found the mysterious letter of which his old friend had spoken just before he died. His surmise had been right, and even now Mr. Paxton, one of the partners, was on his way to Arborfield bearing the important missive. Ross was pleased that he had made such a lucky shot at the whereabouts of the letter, thus saving himself the trouble of a prolonged search.

Paxton, the solicitor, had told him that morning that the instructions received with the document had been to deliver it immediately after the death of the writer, to himself—John Ross. Ross returned to the endless conjectures as to its meaning and contents which had been occupying his mind ever since he had first heard of its existence.

A voice spoke behind him.

"Mr. Paxton, sir, of Paxton & Winterbotham, to see you," said Jenkins, in the lugubrious voice habitually assumed by servants in a house of death.

Ross knocked out his pipe and followed him into the house.

The man who awaited him in the drawing-room was an elderly, alert person, carrying an imposing leather case. He looked as if he had been hurrying and was rather put out, an effect which sat oddly upon him, for he was the type with which one naturally associates orderliness and imperturbability.

The two men exchanged brief greetings over a handshake. Mr. Paxton was obviously annoyed at having had to tear himself away from the city for this sudden journey to Arborfield.

"Pretty inaccessible part of the world, this, isn't it?" he grumbled.

"Don't blame me," laughed Ross. "I'm only staying here myself. But of course I like the country, so it doesn't worry me."

"Well, I don't, I'm afraid," snapped Paxton.

"I can arrange to have you driven to the station when you go back," said Ross in placatory tones. "What do you think all this is about, Mr. Paxton?"

"I don't know. That's for you to find out, Mr. Ross. You are the addressee. I am simply the bearer of the missive. Indeed, had not Mr. Rendel been so insistent that I should deliver it to you myself, I should have sent a clerk down here with it."

He spoke pompously and was evidently still suffering from a sense of injury at having been hustled.

Unlocking the leather case, he extracted a square blue envelope, heavily sealed in several places.

Ross took it from him, and after making certain that it was really addressed to himself, he quietly slipped it into his pocket.

Without further comment he turned to Mr. Paxton:

" You would like some lunch, I expect ? "

" No, thank you, no, thank you. I must get back at once. I could ill spare the time to come right down here, as it was. Thank you all the same. I will really be getting along."

Ross complied without argument. He was only too ready to escape his duties as a host and be free to settle down to the examination of the letter. He rang for Jenkins and instructed him to see that Mr. Paxton was driven to the station by car. He then shook hands with the solicitor and left him.

Returning to the terrace he resumed the arm-chair in which he had been seated before Paxton's arrival. He drew out the letter, opened it, smoothed out its creases and began to read.

My dear John,

This letter is going to surprise you—more than that, amaze you. Very well, be amazed. But remember that no man was ever more serious in his life than I am as I write it.

I say—and it is my considered opinion—that Norma and Edwin Phillips are in love with each other, and that in order to be able to marry they propose to remove the only obstacle —myself.

Norma, who as you know has for years been a devoted wife, has succumbed to an infatuation for this middle-aged country doctor, and my recent ill-health has simply played into their

hands; they are contemplating murder, John. I am in the way. What more easy than for a man's doctor to remove him from this world, particularly if he is already a very sick man?

I am absolutely sane—and I tell you that my wife, Norma Rendel, is at this moment conspiring with my medical adviser, Dr. Edwin Phillips, to cause my early death, for the satisfaction of their illicit passion.

I am not going to interfere. Why should I? At the best, and with the greatest care, my heart will only last out a few months. Death is bound to come soon—a few weeks makes no difference to me.

But it makes all the difference to them. They are not prepared to wait. They are in a strong position and they know it. Everybody expects me to die, and if my end comes suddenly nobody will be surprised.

And so I am watching them—happy to watch them drawing the noose ever closer around their own necks—waiting while they find the necessary courage to finish me off. So I have written this letter, John; because I know, as all the world knows, that once Inspector Ross of Scotland Yard fastens on to a job, the crime is never left unexplained or undisclosed.

You will get this letter only after I have been killed, murdered in cold blood. Bring them both to justice—don't rest till they are dangling from the gallows. For I hate them both; and it is my pleasure to play into their hands now, since I have, anyway, but a month or two to

live, for so I can make sure that they will suffer after I am gone.

Make them suffer.

Paxton has instructions to pay you any sum of money you may want by way of expenses, etc. He, of course, knows nothing of this. He thinks you are to do a job for an old friend. And so you are! My God, John, see that you make them suffer!

Yours,
Herbert Rendel.

Automatically Ross folded the letter into its original creases. Then for a few moments he sat very, very still, his eyes, unseeing, fixed on the distant horizon. But on his face was a look of profound satisfaction.

DEATH AT GREY TOWERS CHAPTER IV

MARION left her room and went downstairs, a faint frown of perplexity clouding her pretty face. She felt in need of fresh air, not only to clear away for a few moments the dreariness and silence of the house, but also to dispel, if possible, the doubts which were crowding her mind. She made her way straight to the garden, and passing around the house, saw the figure of John Ross reclining in an arm-chair on the terrace, apparently deeply absorbed in a letter.

The girl smiled to herself. How lucky it had been, providential almost, this visit of the old friend of her father's in their hour of need. He had taken much of the worry from her mother, and in his matter-of-fact way had been of invaluable help. She paused, wondering whether she should go and speak to him, but his whole attitude seemed to signify that he was deep in his letter and that this letter was of importance; an interruption, she felt, might not be welcome. She turned towards the shrubberies and was soon out of sight from the house.

Marion walked slowly; she had much to think of, much, she had to confess to herself, to wonder at. It had been only a few weeks since she returned from her finishing school in Paris, and for the past two years she had seen very little of her parents. She had been worried, more than worried, at the change in them which she had noticed, sensed almost, immediately on her return. It was not so much the change in her father's bodily health which had disturbed her so greatly, but the change in his mind. When she had left school in order to acquire further attainments in Paris before blossoming forth into English society, her parents had been deeply attached to each other, an unusually happy couple. She had returned to find her father a very sick man, in fact, a doomed man, and she had assumed that his curiously different attitude with regard to her mother

was due to ill-health. Something, however, had occurred that morning, something in her mother's behaviour in the face of this catastrophe, which had seemed to her extremely odd.

Marion could not rid herself of the feeling that it was relief rather than sorrow that her mother was experiencing at that moment. On the night before, the unexpected suddenness of her husband's death had worked terribly upon the nerves of Norma Rendel; that had been obvious. She had succumbed for a few minutes to hysteria, and Marion felt that it was lucky Dr. Phillips had been present. But this morning her mother was changed. There was a new light in her eyes, a light which Marion, for some reason, could not place. She felt that she knew the expression, but for the life of her she could not remember when she had seen it before. Only of one thing she was certain; that it had not before been apparent in her mother's face since Marion's return.

Norma Rendel, whom Marion had left in her sitting-room upstairs, did not, the girl thought, in any way resemble the accepted idea of a newly-made widow. She was resting quietly, resting on the instructions of her medical adviser after the shock she had received. But somehow Marion could not dispel the thought that her mother needed not so much rest, as something else, something quite different. She seemed uncon-

trollably relieved and strangely very happy; she seemed as if were she to follow her own inclinations she would be rushing out attending to the garden, enjoying herself in the sunshine. Norma Rendel had so far followed convention as to don black clothes, but that, an outward sign merely, was the only thing which in her demeanour and behaviour in any way accorded with Marion's preconceived ideas as to what her mother would be like in these very circumstances.

"Had she ceased to love him?" asked Marion of herself, almost with a cry: "Had she ceased to love him?"

That her father had ceased to love her mother the girl had no doubt whatsoever. She had noticed their changed relationship as soon as she had returned from abroad, and it had given her great pain. But somehow it had not entered her mind that her mother's affection for her father had waned. She had been solicitous for his welfare as his illness drew to an end, more solicitous than Marion had expected. She had been terribly anxious; that had been obvious. Was it then merely relief at her husband being released from his suffering which had caused this odd behaviour? A certain cooling of her mother's affection was only natural, in view of her father's changed attitude towards her.

Marion hastened her steps, started to walk briskly. She felt little satisfied with the

result of her deliberations, and on the other hand was rather ashamed of herself for letting her mind dwell upon these thoughts at all. She walked rapidly through the paths which led towards the village boundary of the estate, feeling that increased activity might blow away her worries. Marion had gone towards the village without noticing in which direction she was walking, so absorbed had she been with her thoughts, but now upon realising the path she had chosen she felt glad, as the idea had occurred to her to seek out Francis Page. Frank, with his never-failing cheerfulness and amazing insight into people's thoughts and characters, would be able, she felt sure, to reassure her with regard to her worries.

She turned the last corner and was only a few yards away from a gate leading to the main road, which she noticed was just being closed behind a man. Marion gave a little delighted cry.

"Frank," she said, "I was just coming to look for you."

Detective-Inspector Page had turned sharply, on hearing her voice, and ran forward. He took her in his arms, looked around quickly and seeing that no one was in sight, he kissed her fondly.

"Marion, sweetheart," he said. "I was just coming to find *you*, funnily enough. Is Inspector Ross still with you?"

"Uncle John? Yes. I think he's stay-

ing for a day or two until . . . oh, until all these horrible formalities are over. He is being awfully good, Frank. He's taking everything off Mummie's shoulders; he and Doctor Phillips are doing the whole thing between them."

"Good," remarked the young inspector, "I rather want to see him about this crime we have had in the village."

"Oh, my dear," cried Marion, slipping her arm through his and starting to walk back with him towards the house. "Do tell me about it. Have you caught the murderer yet?"

"I haven't, personally," laughed Page, "but he has been apprehended trying to get away in a steamer from Liverpool, so that's all right. But I wanted Inspector Ross's advice, if he'd give it to me, about the best way to present the case. He's a marvellous man, this fellow you call Uncle John, Marion. You know it, don't you?"

"I know he's very famous," she smiled.

"He's much more than that," replied Frank Page earnestly. "He is *the* most famous detective of the moment. You don't hear much about him except within the Force, but then that is because none of these really big men ever get publicity. They're much too useful to have their faces broadcast in the illustrated papers. But as he is here" —he grinned and squeezed the girl's arm— "well, one might as well make use of him, mightn't one?"

"Of course," Marion laughed gaily. The troubles and worries which she had so recently been experiencing seemed to have vanished in the presence of her man. "He was awfully nice to you last night, wasn't he, Frank? I knew he would be glad to meet you."

"He was," said Page.

Something in the rather abrupt way in which he made this remark struck the girl as peculiar. She came to a standstill and looked up at him inquiringly. Page saw the expression in her eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Mention of last night made me think of something. Another reason why I was coming up—to see your mother."

"I thought you said you were coming to see me," said Marion pertly.

"So I was, silly, but I had to see your mother too, and I was dreading seeing her just about as much as I was looking forward to meeting you."

His words, which might have been spoken jestingly, were said in a serious tone of voice, and Marion did not move.

"Frank," she said. "What's the mystery?"

She spoke banteringly. Frank Page smiled rather grimly, but resumed possession of her arm, forcing her to keep pace with him.

"Don't let's stand here talking," he said. "I want to get this thing over. It's something which, well . . . I hadn't the heart

to speak of it last night, but it's something which will not please your mother at all."

His tone sobered the girl beside him as nothing else could have done.

"Frank," she cried. "What is it? You must tell me."

"I shall tell you," Page replied. "I shall tell you with your mother, because it concerns you all. You remember that night—two nights ago—when your mother and Doctor Phillips went up to London for the evening?"

"Of course," said Marion ingenuously. "That was a wonderful evening, Frank. The first we've really had alone together."

Page smiled down at the up-turned face.

"I know, my dear, but it wasn't quite so wonderful in one other way. Do you remember, just as I was leaving, a message came down from Professor Doveton to say that your father had asked if I would go up for a few moments?"

"Yes," agreed Marion, mystified. "Daddy wanted to see you, didn't he? I know I went to bed. How long were you there with him?"

"When I went up," said Page. "I expected to be there only a minute or two. I thought perhaps your father wanted to say something to me about you, about your future. I thought that possibly he was feeling in the mood for a few parental words to the man who was about to marry his

daughter, realising that he himself might not last long enough to see the ceremony. Well, I wasn't in that room for more than a few minutes, but in that time I had a very different task before me. Your father was as sane as I am at the moment. Professor Doveton, as you know, is a remarkably astute old man, in full possession of all his faculties. There was another man there, a man whom I recognised as soon as I entered the room."

"Another man?" cried Marion. "Who on earth was it?"

"A man," said Page, very seriously, "who had been summoned to the house without anyone knowing, excepting Doveton and your father."

"Had Jenkins let him in?"

"Jenkins was in the secret, apparently. Something happened in your father's room, Marion, something which, well, which I have got to tell your mother now."

"But why didn't you tell her yesterday?" asked the girl.

"I have told you," said Page soberly. "I hadn't the heart to."

They left the shrubbery at that moment and advanced across the lawn towards the house.

The tall figure of Inspector Ross of Scotland Yard rose from his chair on the terrace, to meet them.

" MOTHER dear, can I come in for a moment ? There's something important I want to tell you."

Marion entered her mother's room and glanced inquiringly at the figure seated in an easy chair before the open window.

" Important ? What is it ? "

Norma Rendel looked up in a startled way and the girl's heart smote her at the thought of her mother being called on to bear still more unhappiness.

" It's Frank, mother. I don't quite know what it's about, but he says he has something important to tell you, that he should have told you last night . . . and, dear. . . . I'm dreadfully afraid it's something rather unpleasant."

Norma's lips quivered and for a moment Marion feared she was going to cry, but instead she seemed to pull herself together suddenly, to summon all her strength to face this new development, and rising slowly from her chair she walked towards the door.

" Where is he ? " she asked, in a somewhat breathless tone.

" He's in the sitting-room, dear, with Uncle John."

They descended the stairs in silence and entered the room. Page and Inspector Ross were both standing gazing out of the window,

the former looking very embarrassed and ill at ease.

"You wanted to see me, Frank?"

Norma spoke coldly, but in her voice she could not altogether hide a sharp note of anxiety.

"Er . . . yes, Mrs. Rendel. I'm afraid I've got some rather unpleasant news for you. I suppose I should have told you last night . . . but, well, I . . . I hadn't the heart to."

"Hadn't the heart to? What is this news? I'm afraid I don't know what you are talking about."

Page fidgeted uneasily.

"Well, Mrs. Rendel, you remember the night you went to town with the doctor? I came here to dinner with Marion, and just as I was leaving, Professor Doveton sent a message down to say that Mr. Rendel wanted to see me. I went up and found someone else there—Mr. Peters, the local solicitor, you know, whom Mr. Rendel had sent for."

"Mr. Peters?" cried Norma in surprise. "My God! Why?"

"I'm terribly sorry to have to tell you this, Mrs. Rendel. I only wish it had been anyone but me, but . . . well, I'm afraid I've got to. Mr. Rendel had summoned Peters, Professor Doveton and myself for the purpose of making a new will. The professor and I were witnesses. I've got the will here. Mr. Rendel stipulated that I was to read it to you, but I'm afraid the doctor and professor must be

present too. I told the professor to come along in ten minutes. Ah, here he is ! "

The little professor could be seen making his way through the shrubbery, and from the worried expression on his face it was obvious that he was not looking forward to the approaching interview.

Marion stole a glance at her mother, who had become very still ; her face was ashen, her lips drawn tightly together, but she made no sound, waiting as though stunned, for Page's next words.

" Is Dr. Phillips here, Mrs. Rendel ? I'm sorry, but he must be present too."

" No," Marion interposed hurriedly. " No, he's not here now. I'll ring him up though and tell him to come along."

She darted from the room and gave the message, returning in a few minutes to say that the doctor was in his surgery and would be with them as soon as possible.

During the few moments of her absence no one had spoken. Norma still stood staring with vacant, unseeing eyes out of the window, while Ross and Page hovered awkwardly beside her.

A moment later Doveton was announced. Norma greeted him listlessly and turned to Page.

" *Must* we wait for the doctor ? " she asked in a dull tone.

" I'm afraid it's essential. I'm awfully sorry, but . . ."

" Oh, all right."

Norma moved to a chair facing the window and sat there motionless, as though dazed. For a few moments there was silence, when suddenly a loud rat-tat on the front door broke the tension.

" It's the doctor. He's come by the road," cried Marion. " I'll let him in."

She hurried from the room, returning in a few seconds with Dr. Phillips, who stood in the doorway, astounded at sight of the little group within the room, looking so definitely unhappy and ill at ease.

" What's happened ? " he asked quickly.

In a few words Page explained the facts, and drawing a red-taped legal-looking document from his pocket, said :

" If you're all ready, I will read it out."

" For God's sake get on with it," cried Norma, her voice breaking hysterically at the end of her sentence. Marion did not hesitate ; she ran to her mother and slipped one arm round her, while Page commenced to read in a low clear voice. He gabbled through the paraphernalia of meaningless legal phraseology in order to arrive sooner at the vital matter and so lessen his listeners' suspense ; this he read through slowly, giving each word its full significance.

" . . . do bequeath £2,000 to my daughter, Marion, the remainder to my wife, providing she does not re-marry. In the latter event, however, all of my wife's share to go to

Detective-Inspector John Ross of Scotland Yard."

Page folded up the will and looked at Norma. She had risen from her chair and now stood before him, a figure of passionate anger. Her eyes shone fiercely, and on her cheeks two bright scarlet patches bore witness to her emotion.

"It's abominable," she cried. "Unbelievably abominable. To trap me like this after his death. Oh, how detestable. To think of him lying there, the hypocrite, making his vile plans to leave me destitute."

She burst into a fit of uncontrollable sobbing.

Suddenly Doctor Phillips, who had stood there motionless while the will was being read, his face very pale and drawn, turned to Page and spoke in a strained, unnatural voice :

"Is there no . . . no mention of me in it ?"

Page shook his head ; Norma, looking up, saw the movement and it spurred her on to greater fury.

"I won't stand by this will. I'll fight it out by law. It *can't* be legal. Herbert told me he'd left £2,000 to the doctor and Marion and the remainder to me. I won't abide by it. It's too . . ."

Suddenly a cool voice interrupted her.

"But, Norma, what's all the worry about ? You *still* get everything . . . unless you marry."

The effect of Inspector Ross's words was electrical. Norma shot him a curious look, half fear, half dislike; Doctor Phillips for a moment became rigid, then walked quickly over to the window and turned his back on the other occupants of the room; Professor Doveton pulled out his watch and murmured something vaguely about "getting off"; while Marion, seizing Page by the arm, whispered tensely: "Come, let's go. I can't stand this any longer."

Page gave one last look at Norma, then slipping his arm around the girl, he hastened from the room. A few moments later the professor and Inspector Ross followed suit, leaving Norma and the doctor alone.

DEATH AT GREY TILES — CHAPTER VI

"NORMA, could you spare me a moment? There's something I want to say to you."

Norma Rendel, her face hard and drawn, was crossing the terrace when John Ross, slipping out of a low deck-chair, barred her way.

"What is it? I'm afraid I'm in a hurry. I want to go down to the village to see Peters."

Norma spoke sharply, but Ross did not budge.

" I'm sorry, but I think that what I have to tell you is still more urgent. In fact, I don't think you will want to see Peters at all . . . afterwards."

A look of startled curiosity crossed her face.

" Very well," she said coldly. " What is it ? "

" I'd rather not tell you here ; it's something very private. Can't we go to the sitting-room ? "

Without a word she turned and led the way within the house.

" Well, what is it ? "

" Only this."

Ross carefully withdrew his pocket-book, unclasped it and took out the letter he had received that morning. Carefully smoothing out the creases, he said :

" Your husband gave this letter to his solicitor, Mr. Paxton, who was to hand it to me after Herbert's death. He did so this morning. Shall I read it to you ? "

Norma nodded. Something of the possible contents must have occurred to her ; all vestige of colour had left her cheeks and she stared at him as though bereft of speech.

Quietly, in a very impersonal, detached tone, Ross read Herbert Rendel's accusing letter. Norma made no sound or movement ; she stood as though turned to stone.

So absorbed were they both that neither noticed a figure appear at the french windows,

hesitate, and then stand motionless, hidden from sight behind a giant palm.

After he had finished reading it, Ross folded up the letter once more and slipped it in his pocket-book.

There was a long silence; then slowly Norma turned to him and spoke in a half-dazed tone:

"Well, what are you going to do?"

"That depends on you," said Ross gently.

Norma looked up, a faint ray of hope dawning in her eyes.

"On me? What do you mean?"

"Only this. If I take that letter to a certain quarter, if I state my own suspicions, well . . . Dr. Phillips hasn't a chance. He *is* guilty. I know it. I have other proofs, other evidence. He hasn't got an earthly—that is *if* I take the matter up."

The significance of his tone reached even Norma's deadened senses.

"What do you mean—*if*? Could you . . . will you destroy the letter . . . forget the evidence . . . save him?"

Her voice was passionate, distraught with terror and despair. But Ross remained perfectly calm, perfectly unperturbed.

"Yes," he said firmly, "yes . . . on one condition."

A look of incredulous joy flashed over her face; but it was quickly followed by an uncertain, almost suspicious glance.

"One condition? Tell me. I'll do anything. What do you want?"

" You ! "

The reply came with startling clearness and finality. Norma shrank back as though from a blow.

" What do you mean ? " she cried, her voice no louder than a whisper. " What do you mean ? "

" I mean, my dear Norma, that I love you. I've loved you for years, ever since Herbert introduced you to me . . . from the first moment I saw you, in fact." A hint of passion could be detected in Ross's voice. " I have loved you hopelessly : you were the wife of my friend—quite lost to me. But now . . . now, Norma, I can't lose you again, lose you to a murderer, a common criminal ! I don't know whether it's true what Herbert says, whether you do really care for Phillips, but I do know that you'll never marry him. Why, I'd be the greatest fool on earth if I allowed it. And you—surely you couldn't dream of marrying the man who killed your husband, however much you care for him."

Norma blanched still more, but suddenly turned on the man before her.

" I . . . marry . . . *you*." Her voice was full of disdainful scorn. " You must be mad. I'd sooner die. And I don't believe you. It's all just another trap, a plot. Edwin isn't a murderer, he's innocent. I'm sure of it. It's all a fabrication. Anyway, I love him and I'm going to marry him."

" Oh," said Ross slowly, " that's interesting.

You seem to be the first person who has doubted Detective Inspector Ross's word and ability. My dear Norma, what I am telling you is the most sacred truth. If I want to I can get Dr. Phillips hanged—there's not the slightest doubt about it—hanged by the neck. I've never yet failed to bring anyone to justice whom I have suspected. And with regard to Phillips I don't merely suspect—I know he's guilty. You must realise that what I am saying is not empty boasting: should I be in my present position if it wasn't so ? "

While he was speaking Norma had been staring at him fixedly, her eyes wild and desperate, like those of a trapped animal. She realised with terror the deadly truth of his words, and recognised the futility of attempting to thwart this noted brain, this man of whom her husband had so often spoken in terms of the highest praise.

" Norma," he had been in the habit of saying, " were I a criminal I should fear our friend Ross more than Satan himself."

And it was this man whose powers she was affecting to despise . . . but affecting only, for deep in her heart she knew it was useless. She could do nothing; he had the winning cards.

Ross spoke again in a cool, impartial tone, as though discussing a matter of small importance.

" If you will consent to marry me I will

destroy the letter and evidence. Edwin Phillips shall go free. If not——"

He paused significantly.

Norma flung herself into a chair and burst out into a paroxysm of sobbing. Ross waited motionless until she had exhausted herself, and then murmured softly :

" Well, Norma. Which is it to be ? "

The desperate woman lifted a tragic, tear-stained face and cried in heartbroken tones :

" Can't you be merciful, John ? Doesn't our friendship through all these years mean anything to you ? Can't you destroy the evidence and leave me free to marry Edwin ? You say you love me—well, if you do you'd want me to be happy. How could I be happy married to you, when all the time I love Edwin ? It's monstrous, cruel and monstrous ! "

John Ross shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

" My dear Norma," he said slowly, " what is the use of taking up this attitude ? It's not the slightest use. You must decide now once and for all which it is to be. And don't forget that by marrying me you won't lose your money. If you *did* marry Phillips—which you won't—or anyone else for that matter, you'd lose it. I love you and I'm going to marry you if I can—if not, well, anyway I'll see to it that Phillips doesn't. Come now, which is it to be ? "

There was a moment of silence while the

woman stared at him ; then, before the unswerving determination in his face, her will seemed to snap. She sat there listlessly as though all the life had been crushed out of her ; a piteous figure in her black clothes. Very softly, as though the words were dragged from her lips, she murmured haltingly :

" There's no choice. I'll marry you."

A look of intense satisfaction passed over Ross's face ; he placed an arm around the shrinking woman and whispered tenderly :

" It's all right, Norma, dear. You won't regret it. I'll be very good to you."

The crouching figure at the window moved quickly away, and sped breathlessly in the direction of the village.

DEATH AT GREY TILES CHAPTER VII

MARION ran blindly across the lawn, through the shrubbery and down the paths leading to the main road. Her breath came in gasps, a look of acute fear shone in her eyes and she darted along unseeingly, her one thought being to reach Frank, to seek his aid.

Since the moment when, passing the sitting-room, she had caught sight of her mother, looking terribly agitated, talking to John Ross, and had stopped, wondering whether she might need her help, Marion

felt that she had aged ten years. A sentence Ross had spoken had caused the girl to hesitate in wonder, a wonder which had soon changed to terror and dreadful anguish when she realised the full horror of the situation. That her father should have written such an infamous letter seemed incredible!

"How he must have hated her," thought the girl in bewilderment. "Poor little Mummie!"

And the doctor! Was it possible that he loved her mother so much that he had been prepared to cause her father's death? Her world seemed to be rocking on its foundations; even her Uncle John had proved unfaithful. Marion now had nothing but the deepest contempt for him: that he should carry out such an insidious blackmail, bargain his honour for her mother's hand, seemed unbelievable. Her father, her friends Ross and Phillips, and . . . and Mummie; all her world failing her, changing from loved, familiar beings into strange, sinister people to be feared and avoided. But there was still Frank. The thought of him was her one comfort, and as she ran she kept murmuring to herself over and over again:

"O God, let him be where I can find him, let him be where I can find him!"

Arrived in the village she lessened her speed to a more sober gait, but hastened as fast as this permitted to the inspector's little cottage. Darting through the gate she

rushed up the steps and rang the bell; she leant back against the porch gasping, her heart beating furiously in her anxiety.

To her great relief rapid steps approached the door; it was flung open and Francis Page stood in the doorway, staring at her in startled astonishment.

"Marion! My dear, what's the matter? You've been running. You *do* look ill. Has—has anything happened?"

He helped her into the house, seated her in an easy chair and fetched a glass of water.

"Drink this first, dear," he said. "There's plenty of time."

She swallowed a few drops, wiped her moist brow with a tiny handkerchief, and then managed to gasp:

"I . . . I don't think there is, Frank."

Page looked at her intently, and was amazed at the change in her appearance since the morning; that something had occurred was very obvious, something moreover which was, or so Marion believed, extremely serious.

After a few moments the girl seemed calmer, her breath came more evenly, and she gave him a wan smile.

"I'm sorry to butt in upon you like this," she said, "but, oh, Frank, something terrible has happened and there's only you to come to."

"Why not?" he said soothingly. "That's what I'm here for. Wait a few minutes

though, until you feel better, and then tell me."

The girl swallowed a few more drops of the water and then started to speak.

" Something terrible has happened, terrible . . . and I don't know how to tell you. First of all, what I am saying is to you, Frank—not to Inspector Page. Do you see what I mean? It . . . it concerns my mother, dear, and I don't want you to think you've got a duty to fulfil in any way. You haven't. I'm telling it to *you* personally, not to the police officer. You do see what I mean, don't you, dear? "

Page looked at her in surprise. He could not conceive what she had to tell him, yet he saw the reason for her insistence and answered readily :

" Why, my dear girl, of course. It shall be private, just between you and me, until you say."

" Thank you, Frank," said Marion gratefully ; then she went on in a low, unhappy tone :

" I was passing the sitting-room just now, when I heard the sound of voices. I looked in and saw Mummie looking, oh ! so terribly worried and miserable. She was talking to Uncle John. I didn't know whether to go in or not, and while I stood there Uncle John said such a strange thing that I stopped and listened purposely. They couldn't see me and perhaps it wasn't a nice thing to do, but

. . . well, you'll understand why I did it when you hear the rest. Uncle John had taken a letter from his pocket . . . he said Mr. Paxton—Daddy's solicitor, you know—had been told to hand it to him immediately after . . . after Daddy's death. He read it to Mummie. Oh, Frank, I don't know how to tell you. It's incredible, monstrous! Daddy said that Dr. Phillips and Mummie were in love and had planned to kill him. That knowing he would die in any case he had said nothing as he wanted to have his revenge afterwards. He told Uncle John to . . . to, well, cause the doctor and Mummie to be arrested. How could he? Frank, how could he?"

"But it's absurd," cried Page, in a puzzled tone. "There's no foundation for it. Your mother isn't in love with Dr. Phillips."

The girl drew back as though at a blow and turning her face away she went on in a halting voice:

"Yes, there's more to come, Frank, lots more." Then very slowly: "Mummie *is* in love with Dr. Phillips and he with her. She told Uncle John so."

Page gave a violent start and darted a quick glance at the girl, but he said nothing.

"She told Uncle John so," continued Marion in a flat voice, "because he wanted Mummie to marry him, saying that if she would he would destroy the letter and other

evidence he had . . . otherwise he would bring the doctor to justice."

"*What?*" Page nearly bounded out of his chair. Never had he experienced so great a shock; had anyone other than Marion told him this he would have laughed them to scorn, but it was impossible to disbelieve her. He did not doubt her story for a moment, and it was this which staggered him. It was inconceivable that Ross, the world-renowned Detective-Inspector John Ross of Scotland Yard, should so far be untrue to his professional duty as to make this incredible suggestion.

"And what," he managed to blurt out, "what did your mother reply?"

"She told him," said Marion slowly, "that she would rather die, that she . . . she loved Dr. Phillips, that she didn't believe he was guilty or that it could be proved. Then Uncle John talked a lot about his abilities, and, Frank—can you credit it? and I always used to respect and admire him—he actually pointed out that by marrying him Mummie would keep her money, while if she married anyone else she'd lose it."

The girl's voice was full of scorn, her eyes flashed, and had he not been so deeply absorbed in what she was saying, the inspector could not have failed to admire her beauty at that moment. Page, however, was feeling too sick at heart, too disillusioned to notice anything, and he quickly asked:

"Well, what then?"

"He said if she married him he would save Phillips—if not . . ."

Her voice trailed off and she sat silent, looking vacantly before her.

Again Page could not contain his impatience.

"And what did your mother say?" he asked sharply.

The girl's face became even more white and set; her voice was hardly more loud than a whisper, and Page had to strain his ears to catch her reply.

"Mummie . . . Mummie agreed . . . to marry him."

"Good God!" cried Page, appalled.

Suddenly Marion burst into a wild fit of sobbing, and it was not until fully five minutes had elapsed that she was sufficiently composed to speak again.

"Tell me, Frank, what can be done? We must do something. We *can't* let this terrible marriage go on."

"No," agreed Page thoughtfully. "No. I must think this out. Suppose I go and arrest the doctor myself, straight away, arrest him on suspicion?"

The girl blanched, then cried sharply:

"Frank, you can't do that. You promised that what I told you would not be used officially. Don't you see——" her voice broke miserably—"I don't know where Mummie comes in in all this. I don't know if . . ."

Page put his arm around the trembling girl. His heart was full of the deepest pity and sympathy, for he also was not at all sure about Norma Rendel's innocence in the affair.

Suddenly he turned to the girl.

"Listen, Marion, leave this to me. I'll think it out. I haven't time now. I've got to get back to the station. I'll come round to-morrow and let you know what I've decided. This is too serious a matter to hurry; it's the sort of thing one's got to sleep on. Cheer up, dear, and leave it to me."

He kissed her fondly, and seeing that she seemed more like her old self again, he seized his hat and they left the cottage. She walked with him towards the police station; there bidding her to keep cheerful and not to worry, he hastened into his office, his mind a medley of anxious thoughts.

DEATH AT GREY TILES CHAPTER VIII

PAGE sat in his little study alone. He had finished his supper, a lonely meal, and was turning over in his mind the story which Marion had told him not so very long before. Up to that moment he had found little time to consider the matter, for his work had kept him busy until late.

One thing stood out straight away, and that was that whether Herbert Rendel's accusation against Edwin Phillips was founded on fact or not, Ross by his suggestion to Norma had put himself definitely in the wrong. It was obviously his duty, no matter how little he might credit it, to sift to the very bottom the letter which had been entrusted to him by his old friend; a duty not only to his friendship but also to the official position which he occupied. Herbert Rendel's accusation might well be the ravings of a very sick man, but it was not for Ross to assume that there was no truth in it. His position as a police officer made it incumbent upon him that he should probe into the matter and find out for certain whether it was based on fact. But by his suggestion to Norma, Ross had come out into the open; he had made it clear that he was ready to disregard his obvious duty—at a price; and the price which Norma was to pay for the safety of her acknowledged lover was the gift of herself.

Page shuddered. The situation seemed horribly difficult. What was he to do? He could not take action against Ross, for the very good reason that all the evidence was in the other's hands. Were he to go and face him with his information, Ross could laugh at him; break him if he wished. He had only to deny all knowledge of the affair and privately to destroy Herbert Rendel's

letter. Naturally, to save her lover, Norma would back Ross up, and obviously Edwin Phillips, scenting danger, would do likewise. Page's whole case stood on the word of Marion, and on the word of Marion alone. Not that he doubted her even for half a second: her piteous appeal to him had been only too sincere, but in a court of law Page knew perfectly well that her word would be laughed at against the combined denials of Norma, Edwin Phillips and the great Detective-Inspector John Ross of Scotland Yard.

Page furrowed his brows. The more he considered it the more difficult did the whole situation become. He had reached a deadlock and was beginning to think that he would be unable to interfere and would have to leave the matter in the hands of Ross, to deal with Norma and Phillips as he pleased, when suddenly the door was thrown open and a figure entered. Page sprang to his feet. A visitor at this hour was unusual: a visitor unannounced and obviously in a great hurry was still more unusual. He saw Edwin Phillips standing at the door, his face very white and set.

"Good God!" said Page. "You did give me a start."

"I'm sorry," answered Phillips, in a harsh voice. "I came here to startle you, but——" he laughed—"not quite so soon as this."

Page looked at his unexpected visitor.

There was something odd in his speech, something which attracted the trained ear of the young inspector. His appearance, also, the gleam in his eye, did much to confirm the impression which Page had received that the man was anyway temporarily unbalanced. For a moment, looking keenly at him, Page wondered whether he had taken too much to drink, but he realised almost as soon as the thought came into his mind, that this was not so. Edwin Phillips was obviously sober; yet there was something very strange about him, something quite unlike his normal, rather matter-of-fact demeanour.

Page pointed to a chair.

"Sit down," he said.

Edwin Phillips did not move.

"Is there anybody in the house?"

Page looked at him sharply. Suddenly back to his mind came Marion's story of what she had overheard. Standing before him was a murderer, and moreover, a man obviously not in complete control of his nerves: Page knew that there was no one in the house excepting himself. The old woman who looked after him and the little house which he owned, situated not far from the police station, had gone out for the evening; and she would not return, Page knew from experience, for at least a couple of hours. But he was too wise to inform this . . . killer of the fact. Could it be

that Edwin Phillips suspected the truth, suspected that Inspector Page knew of his vile act ? Could it be that Phillips had come there that night driven desperate by fear, determined to destroy the man who was aware of his crime ? Page suddenly laughed at himself.

" What's the matter, old lad ? " he asked of himself. " Getting imaginative ? Don't be a fool, now ! "

He looked up at Phillips and saw that the doctor was staring at him intently.

" What's the matter, Doctor ? " he inquired casually. " You look upset, somehow. Sit down and have a drink."

" Upset ! " the doctor laughed shrilly. " Well, it will do as well as another word. I am upset, yes. I have got something to tell you, Page, but we must not be disturbed. Is there anybody in the house ? "

Page looked at him straight between the eyes.

" The old woman who looks after me," he said quietly, " has gone out. You can rely upon not being disturbed or overheard. Sit down. What drink shall I get you ? "

Phillips did not immediately reply ; he breathed a sigh of relief and relaxed somewhat his tense attitude. He moved over to the chair which Page indicated and sat down. For a few moments he stared into the fire, then looking up he saw Page standing beside him. Phillips's whole manner now had

subtly changed. There was something almost pleading in his voice when he spoke.

"No drink, no thank you, Page. I've had . . . quite enough to-day. I am worried. My God, I *am* worried."

Page walked over to his own chair and sat down facing the doctor. There was a rather grim expression on his face; he was wondering whether he was about to be called upon to listen to a confession. He was deciding in his own mind precisely how he should act in this eventuality, but the doctor's next words startled him by their unexpectedness.

"Old Henry Green," he said, "is dead."

Page sat up abruptly. Henry Green was a noted character in the village—the local gamekeeper. No one knew his real age, but he must have been well over seventy; yet his advanced years had only seemed to give him added health and spirits. He was never known to be ill, was always bright and cheerful and a favourite with everyone. The doctor's news came as a great shock to Page, for he had been very fond of the old man.

"Henry Green? But I didn't know he was ill?"

"He wasn't," said the doctor sombrely, "not until . . . to-day."

The excitement of the criminal hunter in Page made him speak almost in a whisper.

"Murder?"

Edwin Phillips seemed to shudder at the word; then he laughed wildly.

"Murder, if you like," he cried, "but not intentional murder. Manslaughter perhaps would be a better term. *I* killed him." His voice had risen sharply.

Page held out his hand.

"Not so loud, Doctor," he said evenly. "I don't think you can know what you are saying."

He moved over to the window, which was slightly open, shut it and returned to his seat, pausing for a moment before rapping out a question.

"You say you killed Henry Green. How did you do it?"

Something of the sharpness of his tone seemed to pull the doctor together.

"Henry Green," he replied, "sent for me this afternoon. I went and found him in a pretty bad way. He'd had a heart attack very suddenly. I don't think anybody had ever suspected before that his heart was weak. I did what I could for him. I gave him insulin, a fairly new drug, but a very efficacious one in these circumstances."

Phillips was now talking much more soberly. The turn the conversation had taken, a medical turn, seemed to have calmed him and made him forget for a moment the state of panic in which he had first arrived at the house.

"I injected this drug from a syringe which

I had prepared before leaving my surgery, having some inkling of what the matter was. I sat with him for a short while. It seemed to do him good. Frankly, I was not terribly worried over him. He was bad, but not very bad. There is no reason to fear an isolated heart attack ; it is only when these things become recurrent that we doctors take real notice, or when the heart itself is affected. I left him then and went my rounds. When I got back to my surgery I found an urgent message waiting for me to come at once to Henry Green. I did so. I found him . . . dead."

He paused, evidently deep in thought. For a moment or two Page did not speak. He did not wish to intrude upon his thoughts or to interrupt the story, but when it was obvious that the doctor had relapsed almost into a brown study, Page gently recalled him to the tale he was telling.

" You said a moment ago, Doctor, that you had killed him. I don't quite understand."

Phillips looked up quickly, almost a hunted look in his eyes.

" I did kill him," he said, " and I am still wondering how it happened. I made a mistake."

He paused again.

" Yes ? " helped Page.

" To understand what I am going to say," went on Phillips quickly, " you must know a little of this drug—insulin. It is colour-

less, and many drugs are colourless. There is room there for a mistake, but that one I did not make. Insulin is given normally at a strength of ten watts; in that strength it merely helps the heart, but if it is given in a stronger dose it will kill as surely as a knife or a bullet will. I injected into Henry Green insulin at a strength of eighty watts."

"Good God!" said Page.

"That killed him," continued the doctor. "That killed him in under two hours. Now can you understand why I am upset?"

"Yes," said Page soberly.

He knew well enough that a mistake of this nature was bound to ruin the career of any doctor.

"Yes," he repeated thoughtfully.

"You're wrong," cried Phillips passionately. "You're wrong. You don't understand at all."

Page looked at him in surprise. There was an expression on the face of Dr. Phillips which appalled the young inspector; his eyes seemed haunted as though by the memory of some ghastly thing, some loathsome thought which would not give him peace. His whole appearance had become grim, sinister; Page could scarcely believe that he was really gazing upon the familiar features of the village doctor. Suddenly a softer light came into his eyes.

"I am sorry, Page," he said quietly. "But . . . my God, what's the use? I can't go on."

Page walked over to the sideboard and poured out a stiff whisky and soda, which he took to his guest.

"Here, Doctor," he said, "You'd far better take this. It will help. You must go on, having told me so much. You must finish your story."

The doctor looked up. Suddenly he laughed, a caricature of a laugh, a mirthless sound.

"That's where you are wrong again."

There was a hint of danger in his voice.

"I was not referring to my story when I said that I could not go on . . . but I will have the drink. Thanks."

He took the glass from Page's hand, and the inspector noticed that he could scarcely hold it to his lips; he swallowed the spirit almost at one gulp and replaced the glass upon the table.

"Sit down, Page," he said. "I will go on. I am going to tell you to the end."

There was something inviting in his voice now, almost as if he were the host and Page the guest. A premonition of evil came to the young inspector. He shook it off with difficulty, moved over to his chair and sat down once more.

"Do you see this?" said the voice of Doctor Edwin Phillips.

Page looked up quickly and found himself staring into the muzzle of an automatic held in his guest's hand. A look of wild frenzy

had transformed the doctor's face; his eyes glittered menacingly, two bright patches shone in his otherwise livid cheeks; his whole aspect suggested madness, and for a moment Page wondered whether indeed that was the true explanation of everything, whether he was really entertaining a dangerous lunatic and had been listening to the ravings of a madman. An awful fear came to him that here in this sitting-room before his eyes, Phillips was about to take his own life. The doctor's next words, however, made Page realise that it was his life, and not that of his guest, which was in danger.

"I could shoot you, Page," said Phillips slowly, "I could shoot you where you sit. I agree that the consequences might be awkward and I hope you won't force me to have to do it. I don't want to, I tell you straight. I am much too fond of Marion to deprive her of you as a husband. I am very much too fond of Norma to give her the pain which her daughter's grief would cost her. But in spite of all that I shall kill you just where you sit if you move a muscle during the tale that I am now about to tell you."

In striking contrast to his original appearance, the doctor seemed now to be absolutely master of himself. He had become perfectly cool; he was talking evenly, and although his words were menacing, fantastic almost, he was obviously in deadly earnest.

"I've got a job of work for you, my lad."

The man laughed shrilly. "Odd, isn't it? A man who tried to be a murderer giving a job of work to a detective, but it's true. I've got a job of work for you. Listen. I made no mistake when I injected Herbert Green with that insulin; the mistake was made by *somebody else,* the mistake, if you must know, was made by the murderer of Herbert Rendel."

Page did his best to control the turmoil of his thoughts. What on earth was this? A new accusation? He pulled himself together, all his attention must be directed to what the doctor was telling him.

"So Herbert Rendel was murdered?" he said quietly.

"Herbert Rendel," answered the doctor, "was murdered as surely as I am sitting here. Up to an hour ago I thought I had killed him. *Now I know that I didn't.*"

DEATH AT GREY TILES CHAPTER IX

PAGE sat back in his chair, almost stunned by the revelation which the doctor had made to him; but he was allowed no time in which to think. Phillips, whose speech had been halting before, was now talking rapidly.

"I'll be as brief as I can, Page. You will understand that the little formality of this automatic is necessary . . . for my

safety. I am about to leave the country. If I waited to stand my trial I believe that I could prove I was not the murderer, but I could not get away from the fact that I have been very much an accessory after the fact. You see, for the last six months I have systematically been killing Herbert Rendel. True, at the last moment he died by another's hand, but still I had paved the way. I don't know what view an English jury would take, but I don't propose to find out. I have made all arrangements for my flight to-night. I had done so, anyway. I am thankful to Henry Green that he gave me, although in a most unfortunate manner for himself, the proof that I did not finally kill Rendel. You see, it is pleasant to one who is not an habitual criminal to have that spark of innocence left."

He paused, looked at the glass on the table and saw that it was empty. Page jumped at the chance, made as if to rise in order to refill it, but on his first movement Phillips's automatic covered him again.

" Sit back," said the doctor quietly. " You are right. I should like a drink, but I cannot afford to risk it. It's a long story, Page, a very long story. Nearly a year ago I fell in love with Norma Rendel—and she with me. At first I tried to avoid the house, but . . . well, perhaps I am weak, but I found it impossible. I think that Herbert Rendel must have guessed. At all events,

quite suddenly, from having been a most devoted husband he became a fiend incarnate to his wife. Everything that he could do in little things to irritate her, to annoy her, to humiliate her . . . everything that he could do, could think of, he did. She had a wretched time, poor soul, and then . . . then, he played into my hands. He got ill, Page. His heart went. I can't tell you how surprised I was to be called in to attend him. But after my first examination I was glad. His heart was diseased, he could not hope to live for very long, but he was not very bad, and as the days went by I realised that he was going to be one of those stubborn cases which a doctor always finds so difficult to deal with. One of those cases where the patient will linger on for months, for years, good for nothing, in pain most of the time . . . but alive. Herbert Rendel, Page, was no good to me alive, but he was of infinite use to me . . . dead." The doctor shifted in his seat. " You see what I mean ? You see how easy it was for me ? I used that drug of which I was talking to you a minute or two ago ; it was the right treatment for his case, but I used it rather excessively. I made no mistake about him, no mistake of the nature which was made in the case of Henry Green. He did not die suddenly, but he was dying very surely, dying over a period of six months . . . and . . . and I never suspected that he knew ! "

Page thought of that letter at the present moment in the possession of John Ross.

"When he died last night," went on the doctor's voice, "I thought that he had died from the accumulated over-doses which I had been giving him. I didn't bother to examine him carefully. I went away, Page—even although at that time I thought myself a murderer—I went away glad, for I knew that no obstacle now remained to the happiness of Norma and myself. She, poor soul, knew nothing whatever about the over-doses, thought it was all quite natural."

Page heaved a heartfelt sigh of relief.

"Well, as I say, I went away glad, for we could now get married. There was nothing to prevent us. The husband was dead, the money was Norma's. She wanted me—I wanted her. I woke up this morning and everything seemed bright and wonderful; I went about my work cheerfully. You see, I had no need to go up to the house; our plans were made—and then . . . you sent for me. That will, that new will, Page, was a shock. It was a great shock to both of us, but we had a few words afterwards and decided to go through with our original programme. I have a little money, not very much; I have realised the lot. I have got it on me now. It will be enough to keep us from poverty, anyway. We shall fly with that. Ross, damn him, can have the money, I don't care. But I made my discovery

through Henry Green. That has changed things slightly."

He paused, looked steadily at Page and then went on more quietly.

"Follow me closely, Page. Follow me closely for this is difficult. I always keep the syringe with which I occasionally have to inject, scrupulously clean. For this purpose I keep it empty. Last night when I came up to dine at Grey Tiles, I had my little case with me, because it was, in one sense, a professional visit to the sick man. When I got there I noticed that my syringe was not in its accustomed place. This did not worry me. I did not need it and I thought I had just left it in the surgery. True enough, when I got back I found it and placed it in my case ready for the morning. I had no occasion to use it until I was called to Henry Green. I took the bottle down and put a little insulin into the syringe. I did this hurriedly, for the call was urgent. My syringe, Page, is not of the usual pattern. You don't fill it up by compressing and then letting the lever go again. It unscrews from the top. I didn't look to see if it was empty, I knew it was—for that is my invariable rule. I filled it, as I say, quickly, then rushed out and as I have told you, had to use it. When two hours later I returned to Green and found him dead, there was something about his death which struck me as being suspicious, in view of his state when I left him earlier

in the afternoon. I went back to my surgery and examined the syringe. I found that what remained of the insulin . . . I had not, of course, had time to empty the syringe, having been out on my rounds the whole while . . . I found that the strength of the insulin in the syringe was nearly eighty watts. I looked at once at the bottle which contained the strong mixture from which I made my diluted insulin. I know exactly how full it was. I know that some had been taken from it."

He paused and looked at Page very seriously.

"Do you know what that means, Page? Do you know what that means? I didn't fill my syringe from the undiluted bottle. I didn't have my syringe over a long period last night. Whoever had it then, filled it and used it. To use it means to kill. Only one death occurred last night—and that was the death of Herbert Rendel."

Dr. Phillips stopped speaking. He was regarding the young inspector intently, but never for one moment did he allow the muzzle of his automatic to swerve away from its true aim. As for Page he was too much astonished to be able to say anything. This revelation was so unexpected that for a while he did not credit it, and thought that Phillips had come there with the story in an attempt to clear himself from suspicion. But this, as Page quickly ran over in his own mind

the conversation which had just taken place, he realised was improbable; there had been no need for Phillips to come and tell him anything. If he had told Ross, knowing he had the letter, that would have been a different thing; there was no reason for the doctor, however, to think that Page had any knowledge of the death-bed accusation of Herbert Rendel. Therefore, the probability was that the haggard-faced man opposite him was speaking the truth, and if that were so it put a new light upon the tragic events of the previous evening.

"Pretty little problem for you to solve, Page. I am only sorry that I shall not be here to help you, but . . . I cannot risk it. You, I think, will believe me. That is why I have come to tell you my story. I would have liked to have gone to John Ross, but he came out into the open this morning when he made that proposition to Norma. Thank God she had the sense to pretend to agree to it, to pretend to fall in with his suggestion. But I forgot. You know nothing about that. Rendel left . . ."

"I know all about it, Doctor," interrupted Page quickly, "Marion overheard everything. She told me."

Phillips looked surprised for a moment and then continued rapidly:

"Ross has gone up to London to-night, but when he comes back to-morrow evening, expecting to find Norma waiting for him, he

will find her gone." Phillips laughed recklessly. "Then let John Ross do his worst! I know that he has a reputation for never having failed to run any man to earth whom he was after, but my plans are made, Page, my plans are made. Outside there is a car waiting for me and inside that car is Norma. But I had to come and tell you first."

Phillips got up. Page made as though to do likewise, but the other motioned him back to his seat with the automatic. After one glance at the doctor's eyes, the inspector realised that the man was desperate, and that he could do nothing else but obey his commands.

"When does your old woman come back?"

"She's usually in by about half-past ten."

The moment he had answered Page could have bitten off his tongue. He saw in a flash that he had given Phillips information which was of paramount importance to him, and he tried hastily to cover up his mistake.

"Sometimes earlier, of course, sometimes later. But look here, Doctor, I think you are doing a very stupid thing." Page did his best to make his voice as even, as serious as possible. "If all that you tell me is true, you could prove it in a court of law, and as you didn't kill him you cannot be convicted of murder."

Page was a little doubtful as to the truth of these last words. Undoubtedly Edwin Phillips had done much to kill, had moreover

had the intention; but he knew it was his duty to get the doctor under lock and key if it were possible.

"That's just it," said Phillips quietly. "I can't prove anything, and even if I could prove that what I've told you to-night is true, even if I could tell you who the killer of Herbert Rendel actually was, I would not wait. No, my young friend, I am not being stupid."

"In running away?" Page spoke lightly. "Every criminal is stupid if he runs away, but I don't say you are a criminal and that's for a jury to prove. To run away means that you have got something to be afraid of, means that you yourself think you are guilty."

Doctor Phillips laughed harshly.

"I have got something to be afraid of," he said quietly. "I do think that I am guilty to a very large extent, and that is why I am going, Page; but you have got to give me twelve hours' start. Are you prepared to do so?"

"Not on your life," said Page quickly.

"Did you hear what I said?" went on Phillips very quietly. "You have got to give me twelve hours' start. It is not only to me that you are giving this chance, remember; it is also to Norma, Norma who is the mother of your Marion. Are you prepared to do it?"

"Not a hope," said Page steadily.

Inwardly he felt heart-sick at being com-

pelled to refuse. His love for Marion, his pity for Norma, were being weighed in the balance against his professional duty, but not for one moment did he hesitate. Sentiment must go by the board. He knew that did he agree to Phillips's request his own self-respect would be shattered for evermore.

"That is the answer," said Phillips, "that I expected you to make. Norma thought otherwise. She thought that your love for Marion might influence you."

"Please leave Marion out of it," said Page quietly. "You know perfectly well that I cannot possibly agree."

"Yes," assented Phillips. "I know . . . but women are funny sometimes that way. Still, it doesn't really matter, because you *are* going to give us twelve hours' start, d'you see?"

Page looked at him sharply. There had been a note of determination in Phillips's voice and there was now a gleam in his eye. For a moment the young inspector was apprehensive. He could not tell what was in the other's mind.

"If I can possibly help it," he said gruffly, "I am not going to give you one minute's grace, but I am forced to confess that for the moment, as I am unarmed and as you have that automatic, the play is up to you. How do you propose to prevent me getting on your track long before to-morrow morning?"

"Like this," said Phillips.

Even as he spoke he sprang. Page, sitting in his chair, had only time to throw up one arm in self-defence. He did not know what was going to happen. Phillips was a big man and he fell on top of the youth and jabbed a wet, sweet-smelling handkerchief over his mouth and nose. Page struggled for all he was worth, but he was physically slight and no match for the doctor. By degrees his struggles grew less. In a short time he lay motionless in the chair. Phillips stood up.

"I am sorry, my lad," he said softly, "very sorry, but there are times when one cannot be squeamish. You'll be good to Marion I know, and I don't think you will bear Norma and me any ill will. Good-bye, Page. Good luck."

He took the limp hand in his own and shook it, then laughed at himself for this piece of sentiment, and quickly taking some cord from his pocket which had been cut previously to the required lengths, he bound Page's hands behind his back and his feet together. Phillips thereupon lifted the young inspector as though he weighed no more than a child, and carried him upstairs to the room which he knew to be Page's bedroom. He laid him on the bed and removing the handkerchief from the lad's face, looked at him carefully for a moment.

"You'll be all right," he said, "it's only

chloroform. I'm sorry, old lad, but I had to do it."

He waited for a few moments. A deep sigh came from the recumbent figure on the bed . . . and Phillips acted. Realising that Page was more than half-way back to consciousness he forced open his mouth and placed a gag into it. Tying this carefully, he withdrew noiselessly from the room and down the stairs. A few moments later he was out on the road and had jumped into a car, the engine of which was already running.

A whispered voice came to him from the seat beside him.

" Is he all right, Edwin ? "

" Right as rain," said Phillips quietly. " I've told him everything. He gave me the answer that I expected. He told me that he could not give me one minute to get away in . . . so I have taken the whole night, my dear. But he's all right, don't worry. Marion has nothing to be nervous about."

Slipping the gears into place, Doctor Edwin Phillips drove the car off into the night.

DEATH AT GREY TILES CHAPTER X

DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR PAGE slowly awakened to consciousness. His brain was still drowsy through the fumes of chloroform and he lay

awhile in a half-doze. Gradually, however, the mists cleared and he became aware of his surroundings. In a flash his mind was alert; he realised instantly what had occurred and struggled violently to release himself from his bonds. The doctor, however, had tied them only too well, and after a while Page fell back exhausted, knowing the futility of his efforts.

He lay back and let his mind dwell on the extraordinary events of the evening. So the doctor had had his will: it would be many hours before Page was able to give the alarm. Owing to the gag he could not make any sound to attract the old woman's attention; as it was, her rooms lay on the ground floor and she probably would not have heard him had he been able to call. There was, he saw, every probability that he would not be released until the morning when she brought him hot water, and by that time Dr. Phillips and Norma Rendel should have had a sufficient start.

In his inmost heart Page felt almost grateful to the doctor for having rendered him so helpless. He was thus safeguarded from failing in his duty as a police officer and in his compassion as a lover. To have been the means of bringing about Phillips's arrest and thus causing her mother still further misery would, Page knew, have given Marion deep distress; although her intelligence and loyalty would have made her

realise his impotence to do otherwise. Now, however, he was unable to interfere. He would do everything his duty demanded on the morrow, but he felt pretty sure that then it would be too late.

Lying there during the long hours of the night Page set himself to try to unravel the extraordinary mystery surrounding Herbert Rendel's death. He did not for one moment doubt the truth of the doctor's assertion. The man had been too obviously in earnest, too desperately sincere; besides, where would have been the object of him speaking at all had it not been the truth? Pondering over their strange conversation Page determined to use a particular method, which he had employed successfully on several previous occasions, in order to decide who was the guilty party in connection with Rendel's death. This method Page had learnt from John Ross, it being that great detective's unfailing system for detecting the person responsible for any crime.

In his mind Page carefully selected all the people who might in any way be connected with this death—Marion, Norma, Dr. Edwin Phillips, John Ross, Jenkins, Simpson. These were the only people who were present on the day Rendel died; therefore, according to his method, these people were all suspect. Having made a list of these, the next things he considered were Opportunity and Motive.

Starting with Norma he ran over every

point carefully. Marion he dismissed immediately ; there could be no suspicion where she was concerned. Norma ! Had she had the opportunity ? Undoubtedly. She had insisted upon nursing her husband throughout his illness and would have had every occasion to commit the deed. Motive ? Yes. Her love for Edwin Phillips supplied adequate incentive. Herbert Rendel's death would bring her freedom and happiness.

Had Dr. Phillips the opportunity ? Again undoubtedly. Who more so than a man's physician ? Motive ? A very strong one. His love for Norma.

Page then turned to John Ross. Opportunity ? Yes. He was there on the night of the murder. Motive ? Doubtful. Possibly he might have known of the new will leaving him the money in the event of Norma's remarriage, but the probability was small and Page waved it aside impatiently.

Jenkins and Simpson ? They both had had the opportunity but no motive. Page dismissed them immediately.

He was left, therefore, with the three principals, and for long hours that night Page lay there staring into the dark, thinking . . . thinking . . . thrashing the matter out, dragging up every smallest particle of evidence which might be of consequence, piecing his case together bit by bit, until when the first glimmerings of dawn began to break through the unshuttered windows, a look of deep

satisfaction glowed on his face ; his mind was made up, he had reached a decision.

When the sun was high in the heavens and he judged it must be approaching seven o'clock, Page heard sounds below. The old woman was moving about, apparently making preparations for breakfast. Instantly a great longing to be free of his bonds, an intense yearning for action overcame him. He struggled wildly and then fell bodily from the bed on to the floor. He lay there feeling very bruised and shaken, but to his joy there came rapid steps up the stairs. An instant later there was a loud knocking on the door and an anxious voice called :

" Are you all right, sir ? I thought I heard you fall."

Page was unable to answer, and in a moment the knocking was repeated. Almost at once the door was opened, Page heard a cry of alarm, and the next moment the old woman was kneeling beside him frantically removing the gag from his mouth.

" Oh, sir," she cried wildly. " What on earth has happened ? Was it burglars, sir ? "

All this time she was swiftly untying the cords and in a moment Page, to his inexpressible relief, was able to move freely once more. He felt terribly cramped and stiff but the chloroform had left no after effects, other than a deep thirst.

He quickly stopped the old woman's excited questions and demanded anxiously

whether she had yet tidied up the sitting-room.

"No, sir," she cried, looking at him curiously, "I haven't had time."

"Thank God!" said Page fervently, and rushing out of the room he dashed downstairs into the sitting-room and seized the glass from which the doctor had drunk on the previous evening. Wrapping a clean cloth carefully around this, he picked up his hat and hastened to the police station, the old woman following his movements with worried eyes.

A few minutes later the telephone wires were humming with a detailed description of Dr. Edwin Phillips and Norma Rendel, and instructions were broadcast to every port for the former's arrest. Page no longer felt any compunction in the matter.

"He's practically had his twelve hours," he said to himself, "which is all he wanted, so by this time I suppose he's got clear away."

He then rang up Grey Tiles and asked to speak to Marion. A moment later she came to the instrument and greeted him tearfully.

"Oh, Frank, something else dreadful has happened! Mummie's gone—gone with Dr. Phillips. She went last night and left a note for me. It's here. I'll read it to you." She paused a moment and then went on breathlessly. "*My darling, when you read this I shall have gone—gone with the man I love. Marion, dear, I'm doing this knowing that it*

is for the best, and that you will forgive me. You have Frank, I know he will look after you always. But think well of me, dear, if you can. It hurts terribly to go away like this, but it would break my heart not to. Try to understand, darling, try to forgive."

Marion stopped and Page heard a muffled sob.

" Dearest," he said, " don't worry. I'll be along as soon as I can. I'll be up for lunch. Try to bear up, dear. I too, think it's for the best. Tell me, when do you expect John Ross back ? "

" Just after lunch," replied Marion listlessly.

" Well, I'll be along for lunch, dearest. I want to see Ross. I've got important news for him. Good-bye, dear, and don't worry."

" Good-bye."

He replaced the receiver and leaving the station walked quickly to Doctor Phillips's surgery. Knocking at the door he informed Mrs. Willis, the doctor's housekeeper, that he wished to examine the doctor's surgery and consulting-room. Frightened by his grave manner the woman made no protest, but after an anxious glance, she led the way.

Page made a careful investigation of the two rooms, and eventually removed three articles ; the two bottles of which the doctor had spoken, one containing the diluted, the other the undiluted insulin . . . and his syringe. Then turning to the housekeeper,

Page asked her several questions as to whether people were allowed in the surgery and consulting-room in the doctor's absence.

"No, sir," she replied emphatically, "no one is ever allowed in the surgery, and only in the consulting-room when the doctor is present, or maybe for a moment or two while he is coming."

"Thank you," said Page, "that's all I wanted to know."

Carefully wrapping up the three articles he had removed, he walked back quickly with them to the police station and proceeded to test them for fingerprints.

A little while later, a triumphant gleam shining in his eyes, Page left the office and started to walk rapidly towards Grey Tiles. Marion greeted him effusively, and besieged him with questions. In her black dress, her face deadly white, with deep shadows under her eyes, she looked very pathetic, and Page exerted himself to lessen her sorrow.

"It's all right, dearest," he said. "No need to worry. Your mother will be all right. I'm afraid the police *are* after her, but it's only because she is with Phillips, and it's he we want to arrest. Your mother doesn't enter into it at all. Also I'm quite certain that they won't get Phillips; he's had too long a start. But now, darling, don't let's think about these things any more for a while. Don't ask me any more questions. Let's have lunch first, and then after

I've had a word with Ross I'll tell you everything."

Her face now considerably brighter, the girl assented, and linking her arm in his she led the way to the dining-room.

DEATH AT GREY TILES CHAPTER XI

It was a glorious afternoon, and immediately lunch was over Marion took Page out to the terrace, where they sat in the sunshine. The meal had been scarcely a gay one. Marion, although longing to ask questions, had not liked to disturb his obvious preoccupation. Evidently there was something worrying her Frank more than he would admit. He had made gallant efforts to be gay, to be his usual self; but these had not rung true. Marion felt that behind his cheerful exterior there was some mystery which was harassing him greatly. She had a feeling of apprehension; of what, she knew not. The fresh shock she had experienced that morning of finding her mother gone, of finding that pathetic letter waiting for her, had added considerably to the dreadful strain.

There was, however, something about the young man sitting beside her, something about his mien, which gave her confidence.

She knew he was worried, but felt that she could trust him, and her disillusionment of the last few hours, during which all her preconceived ideas with regard to well-loved people had been proved false, made her cling more than ever to the one person whom she knew to be true.

Page suddenly looked up.

"Marion, my dear . . . I think I can see the end of all this now, but I want you to do something—something that will help."

She glanced at him quickly.

"Frank, you know that I'll do anything to help. Oh, if only we could go away and get married now!"

Page drew in his breath sharply.

"If only we could," he murmured to himself. Then aloud: "Perhaps very soon we will. Listen, Marion: I want you to go upstairs to your room, pretend you've got a headache or something. I think it will be better that way. When Ross comes I will speak to him. You don't want to see him very much, do you?"

A little of her old spirit came back to the girl.

"I should think not! I never want to see him again."

"When do you expect him?"

Marion looked at her watch.

"The train gets in at a few minutes past two. He ought to be up here, well, almost any minute now."

"I think," said Page, rising, "it would be a good thing, dearest, if you went upstairs now. I shall probably take Inspector Ross away from the house. There's something I want to say to him. Something I want his advice about."

He took her arm and gently led her towards the door of the terrace. She looked up at him anxiously.

"You won't be long, will you, Frank?"

"Not longer than I can help," said Page with a smile.

Marion threw up her arms, drew his head down towards hers, and kissed him lightly. Then she darted through the doorway and ran quickly up the stairs. Page watched her until she was out of sight, and resuming his seat on the terrace he lit a cigarette. He could not deny to himself that he was feeling a little nervous. His coming interview with Ross could be nothing but unpleasant. He would have to tell him of what had happened on the previous evening, of Norma's flight with Phillips. It was conceivable that he might be spared this trouble if Ross had been to Scotland Yard that morning. Had he done so he would most certainly have been informed of the hue and cry after Phillips. Page smiled cynically to himself. That would give Detective-Inspector John Ross something of a surprise for the chase to be started without his having started it himself.

Just at this point in his deliberations Page heard the door open behind him, and someone leave the house. He jumped to his feet and, turning, saw Ross facing him. Page looked at him curiously: evidently Ross had not been to the office that morning, or if he had, and already knew, then he was remarkably well in control of his features. But Page had no time to think; Ross spoke sharply.

"I understand from Jenkins that you are waiting for me."

"Yes, sir," said Page quietly.

"I am rather surprised," said Ross, "to find you here at all. Unless it is that you have come to see your fiancée. What's the matter? Have you got into trouble over that murder case you were talking about?"

"No, sir, not exactly." Page smiled. "But I have got something very unpleasant to say to you."

Ross looked at him quickly.

"Something unpleasant to say to me?"

"Yes, sir. I think I should find it easier if you'd sit down for a minute."

For a moment Ross hesitated, and Page thought that he might turn and re-enter the house, but then the man suddenly made up his mind and walked quickly to the chair so recently vacated by Marion. He sat down with Page opposite him.

"Be quick," he said, "I want to see Mrs. Rendel."

"I'm afraid," said Page quietly, "you can't do that."

"I—*what?*"

"I'm afraid you can't do that. Not here, anyway. You see, she's . . . gone."

Ross half leapt to his feet.

"Norma . . . gone?"

For a moment he seemed dazed.

"Yes," said Page to himself, "the lad's not been back to the Yard this morning."

But Inspector Ross was very quick to recover himself. He sat back again, took out his cigarette case and lit a cigarette. Page watched him carefully, and saw that his hand did not tremble as he held the match. He admired his superior enormously at that moment.

"You say she's gone," suddenly asked Ross quietly. "Where has she gone?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," said Page. "I should like to know."

"So should I," said Ross quickly.

He paused, and Page did not interrupt his thoughts. Ross was evidently turning over something in his mind. Abruptly, with a quick movement, he took out his pocket-book and extracted from it a sheet of paper, which he held out to Page.

"Here, young man," he said slowly, "this is in your district. This concerns you. But you will see that a personal appeal has been made to me by Herbert Rendel, so I propose to come in and help you. Just read that."

Page did not need to unfold the letter handed to him to know its contents. But in order to be quite sure that Marion had made no mistake, he smoothed it out and read the infamous message. Then he looked up quietly, and held John Ross with his eyes.

"When did you get this, sir?" he asked.

A faint tinge of colour came into the elder man's face.

"I got it . . . er, this morning. That is why I came down here at once."

Page noted the lie.

"With a warrant?"

Ross laughed.

"As you get a little older, my friend," he said evenly, "you will understand that a letter of that sort scarcely merits a warrant. I've got to satisfy myself that the accusation made is correct before I arrest Phillips."

Page did not hesitate.

"But the flight, the flight of the pair of them," he noted carefully the effect of the word "pair," "rather points to their guilt."

Ross shrugged his shoulders.

"Personally," he said, "I am doubtful whether Mrs. Rendel is guilty, but I have very little doubt that Phillips is."

Page looked down at the letter in his hand, then deliberately he folded it and placed it in his own inside pocket.

"Here," said Ross, holding out his hand, "give that back to me."

"I'm sorry," said Page, "but I have no

intention of doing so. I have no desire that you should make any further use of it, Inspector Ross. I happen to know that you received this letter yesterday. I happen to know that you used it, not for the purpose which it was your plain duty to, but for another, a vile purpose. No, don't get up. You had better hear me through."

Page stopped, wondering whether Ross was going to assault him, but the glare in the elder man's eyes died to a gleam, and he sat back in his chair.

"Go on, pup," he said quietly. "You'll be sorry for this."

"Maybe I will," said Page evenly. "Maybe I won't. I am banking that I won't. Hear me out. Within an hour of your—shall we say—proposition to Mrs. Rendel, I knew all about it. Unfortunately, I heard of it in a way that prevented me from making use of it officially, otherwise, Inspector, I think you might have been suspended by now."

"Just one moment," said Ross quietly. "What's the game, eh? Blackmail?"

"No," replied Page. "I'll leave that to you. But something happened last night after you had left this village. I don't know where you went, presumably to London. Something happened which gave me a chance of acting officially. Circumstances"—he laughed harshly—"a gag, a little chloroform, a rope or two . . . prevented me from acting

until this morning, but as soon as I was released—no, never mind, I won't go into the whole story; it would take too long—as soon as I was released, I say, I got busy. We are looking everywhere at all the ports for Doctor Phillips and Mrs. Rendel. There's a warrant out for Phillips. I don't think they will get him all the same; he had too long a start."

"What the devil," cried Ross, "are you talking about, young man?"

"What you ought to have been talking about yesterday morning," replied Page quickly. "And don't forget it, Inspector, because I don't propose to. Phillips came to me last night; he came to me fully armed at a time when I could not defend myself. I was in his hands. He told me an interesting story. He told me, to put it briefly, that he had done his best to murder Herbert Rendel, but he said he was satisfied, in view of a discovery which he had just made, that he had not succeeded; the hand which killed Herbert Rendel belonged to another man."

Suddenly Ross did a most unexpected thing. He burst into a peal of laughter, of real laughter, or so it seemed to the listening Page. For the first time his confidence was shaken, and he wavered in the conclusion to which he had come, but telling himself that this was mere weakness, and that having gone so far he must continue to the bitter

end, he brushed his doubts aside and turned once more to Ross.

"Good God!" laughed the latter, "haven't you heard that story before, or something very like it?"

Page smiled.

"Yes," he said, "often; but I took a certain amount of trouble this morning. I know I have convinced myself, and I think I could convince a jury that what Doctor Phillips told me last night is true."

"Interesting," said Ross, "very interesting. Proceed, my clever young friend."

Suddenly Page leant forward.

"Inspector Ross," he said. "You've got a reputation in the Force second to none. God alone knows how I despise you as a man," he laughed, "but I don't suppose you care about that. As a police officer—on your past performances, not on this present one—I can do nothing but admire you. I want to ask you a favour."

Ross smiled cynically.

"A curious way to preface the asking of a favour is to insult the man who can grant it. That is what you have done. Still, I'll make some allowance for the hotheadedness of youth. What is it you want?"

"Just this. I want you to take a walk with me up to yonder hill. It's not very far, about a couple of miles. There's something I want to show you there, and on

the way there's something I want to ask you. I want your advice."

Page was leaning forward, obviously deeply in earnest. Ross got up.

"Very well," he said, "when do we start?"

"Right away," said Page, "if you don't mind."

"All right. Lead on."

Page had made up his mind as to his course of action, and now that the climax was drawing very near all his nervousness left him. He felt a curious sensation of elation, knowing that in the next hour or so he would have done with this mystery, would have finished with the abominable revelation of human nature at its worst which had been accorded to both him and Marion within the last two days.

For about a mile they walked in silence, until they were well clear of the village. The road was deserted, and Page very soon turned from it into a wood. A rough path led up towards the hill beyond, beginning at a gentle slope and growing gradually steeper, and after they had been walking along this for a few moments, silently side by side, Page suddenly spoke.

"Inspector Ross," he said quietly, "I want your opinion as to the conduct of a police officer in certain circumstances. I shall be very much obliged if you will not interrupt me. It will make it so much easier for me to speak."

Page stole a glance at his companion, but Ross was looking straight in front of him, a set expression on his face.

"Well?"

"It so happens," said Page, "that it has come to my knowledge that a certain police officer has made use of his position for his own personal ends."

"Are you referring to me?" asked Ross quickly.

"Wait. I am not referring to Mrs. Rendel, if that's what you mean. The situation, as I see it, is that this police officer has been guilty of conduct prejudicial to the good name of the Force." Page suddenly laughed. "That's a very polite way of putting it," he said quietly. "His actions were just about as bad as they could be. What do you think that police officer should do?"

"Resign," said Ross at once.

"Get out before he is got out? Very well, I thought you would say that. Now put it this way. Another police officer has information—of the authenticity of which there can be no doubt—of this other police officer's guilt. The guilty man refuses to resign. What should the other man do? Again for the good name of the Force?"

"Expose him," said Ross quietly. "But why beat about the bush like this, Page? What you mean is this: you suggest that you can prove that I used that letter for my own ends, that I was prepared not to

prosecute Edwin Phillips if Mrs. Rendel would marry me. Is that what you mean ? "

" That'll do as a start," said Page quickly.

" Oh, as a start, will it ? You are putting yourself into the position of the other fellow, the fellow who knows. You are assuming that I will not resign ; you are asking me what you should do ? Very well, I'll tell you. Do your damndest. What can you prove, you silly boy ? Do you think your word is going to be taken before that of Inspector Ross ? " Ross laughed harshly and stopped in his tracks. " Look here, Page, if that's all you wanted to ask me, if that's why you've taken me this absurd walk, then I am not going any farther, see, and my last words are—do your damndest, get on with it as quick as you like. But I do suggest something else to you, and that is that you'd better clear out of the Force. There's no room for you and Detective-Inspector Ross, and let me tell you that Inspector Ross is staying. If you don't get out, I'll get you out."

" Thank you for the advice," said Page. " Half the job is done, anyway. But you remember there was another half. I told you I wanted you to come this walk because I wanted to show you something. Will you come on ? "

" What is it you want to show me ? "

" We've got about another half-mile or so. Won't take long. Will you come on ? "

For a moment Ross hesitated, then, shrugging his shoulders, he resumed his walk. Neither spoke again until Page led the way out of the wood, after a stiff climb, on to a small plateau. Page walked boldly to the edge and signed to Ross to follow him. The inspector did so and looked down. They seemed to be standing on a high mount, the sides falling away precipitously down to a deep quarry. The elder man stepped back quickly ; the drop was frightening. Page turned and looked at him.

" A man killed himself here a year ago," he said. " Rather a good place to do it, don't you think ? He just dropped over."

He paused, but Ross only stared at him steadily.

" Well ? Is it to show me the place where a poor suicide ended his life that you have made me take this walk ? "

" Yes," said Page brightly, " that and another reason. I thought . . . well, Inspector John Ross, I thought you might like to follow that poor fellow's example."

" *What ?* "

Ross almost crouched back. A subtle change had come over him. The whole expression of his face had altered. A look of horror, of unbelieving fear, filled his eyes. Page remained motionless, staring at him.

" Just let me explain," he said very quietly. " I have told you before, down at

the house, that Doctor Phillips came to see me last night, and that he gave me certain information. I thought, as you remarked at first, that it was merely a silly excuse to try to divert suspicion from himself. But it has been my habit, Inspector Ross, as I believe, it has been yours in the past——" He stopped for a moment and smiled. "Funny, really, how I have modelled my work on yours—always to probe into any information which has been given to me. I therefore went to the doctor's surgery this morning as soon as I was released, and I found certain objects which I wanted. I was lucky, because I gave the doctor a drink last night and I was able to take the impression of his fingerprints from that glass. I therefore knew, you see, by testing the other objects which I took . . . I knew if anybody else had touched them."

A deeper change came over the listening inspector's face, the colour left him. He seemed grey, he seemed to have become years older.

"It might interest you to know," went on Page, "exactly what those objects were which I removed from the doctor's surgery. They were two bottles, Inspector Ross, two bottles. One contained an undiluted drug, the other a diluted, harmless drug which is used in medicine. The third object which I removed, which is perhaps of still greater

interest to you, Inspector, was the thing he injects with—the doctor's syringe."

"But I . . . you didn't find my finger-prints there!"

"You were careful to wipe them off," said Page, jumping at his chance, "but not quite careful enough, Inspector. And I knew they were yours, for last night you held my cigarette-case—my *polished* case."

"What do you mean?"

The voice was hoarse.

"You were not quite careful enough, Inspector. You know, better than most men, perhaps, how every criminal makes one mistake. You thought you had committed the perfect crime, but I think you were not quite careful enough, or perhaps you thought that nobody would look into the matter. Was that it?"

For a moment Page thought that Ross would spring at him, then suddenly the man collapsed and the picture which he presented was piteous. Page could not help contrasting the Ross of a moment before, the well-known figure of Detective-Inspector John Ross of Scotland Yard, with the shrivelled-up, almost whimpering, old man who now faced him.

"Yes," said Ross in a croaking voice. "Yes. I did it. But I only put the finishing touch. He was practically dead, anyway. My God, I wanted Norma, Page. I didn't know, I only half suspected the real

truth about Edwin Phillips and her. When I came down that evening and saw her again, I wanted her, wanted her so much that I felt I could do anything, anything to make her mine. And Herbert had been ill for so long, lingering on month after month, so I . . . I did it. Well, what are you going to do ? "

" I know what I ought to do," said Page quietly. " But well . . . never mind why, but I am going to give you a chance. In the French army when somebody commits an act which is dishonourable, his brother officers present him with a revolver—so I am told—and leave him alone. He knows what to do, and he does it. I suggest that I should leave you here. It is an easy way out. You have only got to make a false step or something. Either that, or I have got to arrest you, and that would give the Force a bad name ! "

Suddenly a gleam of cunning came into the almost demented eyes of the man before him.

" Oh," he said, his voice very sinister and full of malice, " but why should I be the only one to go, Inspector Page ? Why shouldn't you come with me ? "

He scarcely finished the words, but leapt with the agility of a panther at Page. The younger man, however, had been expecting just such an attack : he side-stepped quickly. With a frantic effort Ross tried to pull

himself up, but he was too heavy a man. For a moment he seemed to stagger on the very edge of the cliff . . . then, with a piercing yell, he disappeared from sight.

Page stood quite still for a moment; then, very quickly but very deliberately, he walked back down the hill towards the house.

DEATH AT GREY TILES CHAPTER XII

FRANK PAGE returned to the house the way he had come. As he approached he saw the dainty figure of Marion standing on the terrace waiting for him. He went straight to her.

"I saw you go," she said. "I saw you and Inspector Ross go off towards the quarry. Where is he?"

For a moment Page was at a loss.

"He . . . he stayed there."

Then suddenly Page realised what his course of action must be.

"Sit down, Marion, for a few minutes, will you? There's something I must tell you."

He looked at her and was immediately struck with her amazing beauty. Never had he seen her looking so sweet, so appealing, never had she seemed so desirable. Since their lunch together a happier light

brightened her eyes, a deep rose tinged her cheeks, and she appeared more composed than he had seen her during the last two days.

Page made his explanation as simply and in as few words as possible.

"I found out, Marion, who killed your father. It was not Edwin Phillips, although he did his best. It was someone else."

"Not . . . ?"

"Yes," said Page soberly. "John Ross. I had no proof, although I knew for certain. I knew, oddly enough, by using the very method that John Ross has been famous for all his life. Motive: opportunity. That's what he always thought of whenever he was faced with a murder case, and when he got the right man in his mind he just harried him until he got the truth out of him. That's what I did. It could only have been John Ross. He had the motive. You see, he was passionately, absurdly fond of your mother. He had the opportunity when he was with your father the night before last. I found out that he had the means as well, for he visited Edwin Phillips, and I have no doubt that he obtained the fatal syringe when the doctor's back was turned."

He paused; and then smiled gently.

"I'm afraid I followed in his footsteps even more than he suspected. He was apt to bluff a man into confession: well, I did the same. I bluffed him: I told him that

he'd left fingerprints. At first he would not believe me. He knew, you see, that he'd taken all precautions, but I made out that I was certain. Then he confessed. I could not have proved it, Marion, because I found no fingerprints. I feel in a way . . . no, I don't." The young man smiled. "One can't be sorry for a man who takes another's life."

Marion was very pale, watching him with a set face.

"What did you do?" she asked, and her voice was very low.

"I gave him the choice of two things," said Page soberly. "I gave him the choice of arrest by me or the only way out . . . the taking of his own life. But the world would only know that Detective-Inspector John Ross of Scotland Yard had missed his footing at the top of the cliff and had fallen to his death. I think it is better that way, Marion. I'm glad he took that way out."

Page withheld for his own knowledge only the attack which Ross had finally made at him.

"You see, it wouldn't have done the Force any good."

"Oh," said Marion, with a little piteous cry. "How I hate the Police Force."

"And so do I," said Page steadily. "I hate it now. Up to last night I thought it was really rather good fun, but now I loathe it, Marion, loathe it just as much as you do.

Listen. I have started the ball rolling. I have started the chase after Edwin Phillips and your mother. I could not do otherwise, you see . . . I am a police officer still. But at the same time that I started that chase I sent in my resignation. I shall not be concerned with their arrest if they are caught. There's . . . well, there's a good opening, I believe, out in Canada for a man of my age, and there's a boat leaving early next week. I shall be free by then, and . . . well, if it meets with your approval, you see, I thought we might be married before. I have had a special licence now for some hours."

Marion looked at him wide-eyed.

"My dear, you are leaving your profession . . . the profession which you love . . . for me?"

Frank Page held out his arms.

"I loved my profession, yes," he said, "but, well . . . I've got a new love now . . . I love you so very much more."

THE END